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THE CAREER OF CLAUDIA.

The Career of Claudia.

BY

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"THE ROSE GARDEN," "NEAR NEIGHBOURS," "AN INTERLOPER," ETC.

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THE CAREER OF CLAUDIA.

CHAPTER I.

SHE was, it must be owned, rather surprised that no one had come to meet her at the station. Certainly she had assured them in her last letter that it was unnecessary, and that she could manage very well by herself; but, in spite of assurances, she had hardly expected to be taken at her word, and when the train stopped, looked questioningly up and down the platform for the faces of her cousins. No one, however, whom she had ever seen before, presented herself, and Claudia found that she was thrust upon her own resources. They were fully equal to the strain, the

arrival offered no difficulty and required no assistance; it was merely that she had pictured its causing some thrill of excitement in her new home, since it is not every day that a young cousin, so much in advance of the world, as she could not help believing herself to be, comes to live with three elderly, and, therefore, from sheer necessity of circumstance, commonplace sisters. Put into words the thought smacks of conceit, but nothing would have shocked Claudia more than to have seen it in words: it was not even sufficiently formed to deserve to be called a thought, and was, rather, a vague impression, a shadowy groundwork for the surprise.

Still, it existed sufficiently to impel her to look out of the window of the fly, after having assured herself that her bicycle was safe, and to wonder whether, even yet, some unpunctual feminine figure might not be seen hurrying along the street, all excuses and welcome. She looked also critically at the rows of houses on either side, such as are common enough in every country town, and at the grey towers of the cathedral rising beyond the roofs. Roads branched

away, she passed a church, defiant in the ugliness of some sixty years ago, the rows of houses changed to long walls with tall trees feathering over them, and at last the fly turned at an iron gate, and drove towards a white house, with a door set squarely on the western side, and a blaze of colour about it which Claudia dismissed with contempt as "bedding-out stuff." It was likely, she felt, that the door would be hospitably open, and an expectant flutter of draperies prove that she was eagerly watched for; when nothing of the sort was visible, Claudia philosophically withdrew her head, convinced that urgent engagements stood in the way of her cousins' welcome, and, although still surprised, she was not in the least affronted.

The few moments which remained she spent in a flying wonder as to what her future life would be like, if wonder is not too strong a word, for to herself she had pictured it as clearly as she ever pictured anything, being a young woman who held that definite outlines savoured of Philistinism, and that in order to receive impressions truthfully, the mind should be in the

condition of blotting-paper. She wished to begin her new life in this recipient state, and she piqued herself upon her powers of adaptation, which, to say the truth, had not as yet been much exercised. Possibly it was to prove their strength that she had chosen to run counter to the prognostications of the world—her world—and when her mother died, and a dozen relations opened their doors to receive her, at the end of a year which she spent at a college, preferred to write to the three sisters who had made no sign, and ask them to admit her into their home—for the present. She was careful to make that reservation.

Claudia took this step from choice, not from disgust, feeling nothing but kindliness in the opening of the dozen doors, to her and her fortune. She flattered herself that she was a cynic, but her nature was really frankly unsuspicious, and, finding no difficulty in believing that her society might add a pleasantness to life, it did not surprise her that her relations should wish to enjoy it. But something—it is difficult to say what—drew her imagination to fasten upon the prosaic aspect of the three cousins, living

in a remote county, near a quiet cathedral city. She had reasons for the step which she considered sufficient, but perhaps it was the very prose of the situation which chiefly attracted her, for she loved poetry so passionately that she would be certain to do prosaic things.

The fly stopped, and the bell was rung, without a head appearing at either window, and though the maid who opened the door looked agreeably expectant, it appeared that neither of the Miss Cartwrights was at home. Miss Philippa, however, had left a message that if she were not in she hoped to be back very shortly, and Miss Hamilton must have tea without waiting.

Claudia accordingly went through the hall into the drawing-room, smiling, but a little disappointed that the house in which she found herself was not more like what she had expected, a home in which she might have worked a beneficent revolution. There was a good-sized, if rather dark, hall, hung with fine prints, and the drawing-room was almost too bright and cheerful. Flowers, books, and china, she might have expected, but there was grouping on which her eye

fell with some surprise. She reflected with a sigh for which she might have found it difficult to account, that fashion now penetrated everywhere. Then she sat down in an extremely easy chair, took off her hat, took up a book, and waited.

Seen thus, Claudia's beauty was more striking than when the hat hid a small dark head, and to some extent shadowed eyes which were at once sweet and eager. Her nose was rather piquante than classical, and her cheek had a charming dimpled roundness. Her figure was both small and slight, and her clothes fitted admirably. Altogether, when Philippa Cartwright came hurriedly in, her eyes fell upon a pretty picture of a young girl lying in a deep chair, her dark hair flung into strong relief by the red silk cushion in which it was buried, and on which slanted the rays of an afternoon sun.

"My dear Claudia," she exclaimed, "how inhospitable you must think us! And why didn't you have your tea? I told Jane to insist upon it. Anne and Emily are in the town with Harry Hilton, and I intended to have been at home long ago. I might have known better. But you shall have tea at

once. Here it comes, and plenty of scones, I hope. Sugar?"

"Please. But let me pour it out," said the girl, pleasantly. "I dare say you are much more tired than I am."

Miss Philippa laughed.

"I? Oh, I am never tired," she said. "I haven't the time. Let me see, Claudia, I quite forget if you know our country?"

"Not at all. And I thought it lovely as I came along, though one couldn't say much for the farming." Her voice changed, and she said more shyly, "It is very good of you to have me in this way."

"Well, it is simply an experiment on either side," returned her cousin, giving her a comprehensive look. "We don't in the least know whether you will be able to do with us, and of course it will take you a little time to discover, so that no one is to feel at all bound in the matter. That is my one stipulation. And we have agreed that from the very beginning—unless you dislike it—you are not to be treated as a visitor, but as if you lived here, and had all the independence of home. I began, you see, by coming back too late to receive you,"

added Miss Philippa, with twinkling eyes. "Otherwise it doesn't seem to me as if you could judge fairly whether you like the position or not. What do you think about it?"

Claudia was looking straight at her and evidently considering.

"Yes," she said, with a little nod, "I agree with you. There is a good deal I have to explain, but that can wait. Yes. That will leave us freedom on both sides, for I warn you, you are very likely to disapprove of me. I hardly liked to use the word experiment, but I should have had to get at it somehow. You see, my sympathies are very much with what I suppose you call the new woman."

"When you're my age, my dear," said Philippa, bluntly, "you will have discovered that there's nothing new under the sun. However, you can be as new as you like here, and you will charm Emily—so long as you don't consider it a part of your mission to call for brandies and sodas. She is a blue-ribboner, and so is Jane, the parlour-maid."

Claudia detected ridicule, and flushed.

"I think teetotalers are extraordinarily ill-balanced, though I respect them," she returned stiffly.

"Yes, please respect them," said Philippa, with a laugh. "Now, will you come to your room?"

Claudia got up and went to the window. She turned with eager excitement.

"A river! Is that really a river? Oh, delightful!"

"Yes, we can provide you with that, and it is a very tidy river for fish, I believe—at least Harry Hilton says so," said her cousin, following her. "He will be able to tell you more about it."

"Oh, I don't care about fishing," the girl said hastily. "I was thinking of its capabilities, and how splendidly one can utilize them."

"Its capabilities?" repeated Philippa, puzzled. "Well, whatever they are, your window commands them, for we have given you the south room on account of the view, otherwise there is a larger one to the west. But come and see for yourself, for if you prefer the other, it is quite easy to change. Jane will help you to unpack."

"No, thank you"—Claudia spoke firmly—"I like to do everything for myself."

"Well, you know best, only don't crowd your experiments. Here is your room," went on Miss Cartwright, opening a door at the end of a passage; "your room, that is, unless you like the other better. I hope they have brought up all your things. Dinner is at seven, because Emily has a meeting to-night. You will have to accommodate yourself to meetings. By the way, Harry Hilton is staying with us, and he says he once met you at the Grants'."

"I dare say," returned Claudia, indifferently. "I don't remember."

"Well, he is a cousin on the other side of the house, one of the Hiltons of Thornbury, you know—or perhaps you don't know—and is here a good deal—on and off. Now I will leave you in peace."

She was gone, and Claudia, barely glancing at her pretty room, sat down on the window seat, and stared enthusiastically at the strip of silver light which marked the course of the river.

It gave a charm and variety which would

otherwise have been wanting, for though the country round was fertile and smiling, it had neither breadth nor distinctive features. At one point, indeed, there was a tantalizing peep of vanishing blue hills, but the foliage of the elms was heavy, and the trees themselves stiff with the cutting which deprived them of their lower branches. After a long silent gaze, Claudia broke out into an exclamation—

"Oh, how one could improve it!" she cried, leaning forward, and eagerly tracing lines and curves in the air with a sweeping finger. "What opportunities they have thrown away! To raise the ground there by a long beautiful slope of grass, to plant out those hideous chimneys, and cut, cut, cut! They will—they must—let me do it, and then one could get the most splendid effects of light out of the water. Emily and her meetings and her blue ribbons may be an infliction, but I could bear almost anything for the sake of having a river to study."

She jumped up eagerly, unlocked a bag, and took out a book full of blank pages, in which she was presently alternately writing

and drawing, not pausing so much as to look at the garden below when she heard voices beneath her window.

Meanwhile Philippa Cartwright ran downstairs to a small morning-room where she wrote notes with vigour until her sister, Anne, the eldest of the three, a woman rather heavily built, and with a kindly sympathetic face, looked in upon her.

"Is Claudia come?"

"Yes—and—unfortunately—I—was—not—home—in time," said Philippa, speaking more slowly as she wrote more hastily. "There!" She folded and flattened the note, addressed it, and began another. "Where's Harry?"

"Matthews has got hold of him about the vines. Can't I help you?"

"Bless you, my dear Anne, haven't you yet learned to keep in your own sphere? Notes belong to mine. By the way, talking of spheres, I think you may as well enlarge yours and take in Claudia."

"Why? Isn't she nice?"

"Very! Charming! And I don't deserve that speech when I am presenting her to you just because I think she will be such

an effective charge. See if she doesn't distinguish our house!"

Anne shook her head gravely. "You don't like her."

"I do, I do, I do! Don't you know me well enough to see that I am at this moment dying of jealousy? It is such a splendid thing to be young, as one only finds out too late. Her dark eyes are so pretty, and her figure is so pretty, and her frock fits so well! One oughtn't to have such contrasts forced upon one if one is expected to keep amiable. Why, up to to-day, I had fancied that because Emily had so few grey hairs, she was quite a young thing! It is all very well to pretend to be philosophical. I say straight out that I hate growing old."

"Is that all you have against Claudia?" asked Anne, smiling.

"Oh, it's enough! It means that you will lose your heart to her, and so will Harry."

"Harry?"

"Yes. I am not sure he did not do so a little the first time that he met her. Well—he must take his chance. You and his mother are always fussing about his marrying, and here's his opportunity. I don't

know that even you can wish for anything better. An extremely good-looking girl, and a pretty fortune." Philippa began to laugh.

"What is it?"

"Only something she told me. Never mind. She will tell you all without loss of time."

"Well, as to Harry, I give my consent—if you do; for, in spite of jeers, you will be quite as particular as I. I wonder whether there is really any chance of his taking a fancy?" questioned the elder sister, with a touch of wistfulness behind her words to which Philippa at once became responsive.

"He is a very good fellow, bless him!" she declared heartily, "a very good fellow indeed, even if he has a few more faults than you and Minnie will admit, and I must see a great deal more of Miss Claudia before I give my consent—which has so much to do with the matter!" she added, falling back on her usual manner.

"Harry thinks a great deal of your judgment."

"That's an appreciation apt to be tucked on one side in the great affairs of life. Still,

I'm very much obliged to Harry for the compliment, and it will certainly make me careful to avoid rash counsels."

Claudia came down to dinner in excellent time. Her black dress was well cut, and set off the small dark head, and the eager eyes; if she were at all shy, she did not show it, and she kissed her cousins and shook hands with Mr. Hilton without a trace of the new manners for which Philippa was amusedly watching.

"I remember you now," she said to Harry; "at least I think it was you who told me about a fox-terrier?"

"I have her here," said Harry, flushing with pleasure.

He was a young man with, as she decided at once, an excellent face, although both in face and figure there was a wasteful inclination to breadth. The eyes were grey and honest, however, and would have redeemed worse faults. He laughed readily and happily, and Claudia reflected further that if he were never likely to set the Thames on fire, he was certain to be a popular man in his own neighbourhood. He did not interest her, but inwardly she

gave him a half-contemptuous credit for a dozen safe and good qualities, which she reflected were probably allowed to run idly to seed. Claudia was in the first ferment of life, in which she required that every one's work should be spread before them, parcelled out as distinctly as any allotment ground.

Yet her cousin Emily, the youngest of the three sisters, whose views ran in the same direction if in a different groove, roused in her an immediate antagonism. Emily was the useful woman of the town; secretary to two or three societies, warden, committee woman, what not! To her turned the thoughts of all the clergy when a new work had to be started, or an old one revived. She knew exactly how many pounds of butter and pots of jam were necessary for a parish tea; she slaved at school-treats, and did the work of two curates in her district. Claudia, whose schemes swept to the regeneration of mankind, and a general equalization of things in the world, was partly contemptuous of, and partly irritated by Emily's absorption in what she regarded as miserable make-shifts, unworthy of the

consideration of any one who had passed a course in political economy, and whose papers had been favourably annotated by the examiner.

She spent her evening in garnering observations, telling herself that she was naturally curious about her new surroundings; what, however, continued to surprise her most, was that she herself appeared to excite less interest. Her cousins, Anne especially, accepted her with kindly goodwill, but when Philippa had said that from the first she was to be treated as one of the family, it was evident that she was not using a figure of speech. No one was in the least overwhelmed by her arrival, nor did it cause any divergence in the currents of interest which flowed strongly. Claudia listened, wondering whether under any circumstances of life could she be carried along by such currents; she hoped that would never be expected of her, but meanwhile could not doubt that expectations of some sort existed, and began to have an unacknowledged desire to say something which should astonish her hostesses. She had no such wish as to Harry Hilton, perhaps instinctively aware that she could

impress him by simpler means, and she talked chiefly to him, suiting her remarks to his capacity, while listening as attentively as she could to the remarks which dropped from the others.

"Well, Emily," Philippa was saying, "I warn you that if you're going to trust to Mr. Helmore's eloquence, your meeting will be a dismal failure. He's a stick. You had better get some one sent down from head-quarters, even if it does increase the expenses."

"I really must try to avoid that," said her sister, nervously; "and I assure you I haven't come to the end of my resources yet."

"You're a wonderful woman."

"Here's Harry," put in Anne. "Harry has done nothing for a long while."

"They know my jests by heart. No, no; here is Miss Hamilton."

"To make a speech?" asked Claudia, smiling.

She was careful to express no surprise, for, so far as she knew, there was no possible reason why she should not make a speech. But Harry was evidently of another opinion.

"Good gracious, no!" he protested. "Only to help in the entertainment."

"Don't ask her," interrupted Philippa. "She's a Radical."

"Of course," said Claudia, calmly; "and a Socialist. I don't see how one can be anything else—that is to say, any one who takes the least interest in his fellow-creatures."

She was a little disappointed at the effect upon her listeners. Harry, it is true, became rather redder, and Emily uttered a protesting "Oh!" but Philippa and Anne showed no signs of having received a shock. They were smiling. It was Harry who hastened to say—

"Oh, you'll be converted. You've come to the right house."

"I don't think I ever converted any one in my life except old Pentecost, who you all vow is half-witted," said Philippa, shaking her head. "In these days no one is converted. He or she grows up with an idea, and takes in the newspaper which supports it. But I am rather glad about Claudia, and I think she shall make a speech after all."

"Just as you like," said Claudia, easily. "Do you speak yourself?"

"Oh no; I have never been young enough."

"Debating clubs do that for one, at any rate," went on the girl, unheeding. "They take away all fear of one's own voice. But I haven't gone in for them much, because, of course, that sort of thing is not required in my profession."

This time she was more successful in moving her audience. Emily said eagerly—

"Your profession? Oh, Claudia, this is very interesting! What is it?"

"I am a landscape gardener. Didn't you know that I had been studying at the college?"

"Yes, but we thought—well, we did not realize that you were actually working there."

She assured them that this had been the case, keenly enjoying their surprise. Philippa, however, asked at once—

"Well, but the result, the outcome? Shall you practice?"

"Certainly."

"And take pay?"

"If I did not, I should have no right to

enter the market at all. I go into the ranks, to be treated exactly like the others."

"Only what is play to you is living to them," remarked Philippa. "You can never place yourself on the same footing. However, as Emily says, this is interesting. Had you a particular fondness for gardening?"

Claudia could not say that she had. "But one had to choose something. I could not have been idle. I did think of shop-dressing."

"Shop-dressing?"

"Yes; a girl I know has taken to that. She starts very early every morning in order to arrange the things in certain shop-windows. It is pleasant work enough, and she gets three hundred a year. But it is rather a bore having to go out at such an unearthly hour, and on the whole I thought landscape gardening preferable."

"But what is it? How do you do it?" asked Anne, leaning forward and smiling. She was the softest of the sisters, large and fair.

"I lay out gardens for people," said Claudia. She scented ridicule, and was determined to speak simply.

"Gardens? Gardens on a great scale, I suppose?" put in Philippa. "A landscape means something vast."

"Oh, not necessarily. Of course one might have to rearrange a park; but your garden, for instance, is a delightful size. And now you know why your river enchanted me. I always wanted to try my hand upon a river."

"Did I not tell you she was a Radical?" asked Philippa, addressing the others. "Imagine our good, respectable, steady-going river turned out of his centuries-old groove! No, Claudia, we are not going to deliver him up to your tender mercies, and could not if we would. A river—a real river—is a more important personage than you conceive; not to be trifled with even so much as the government of a country."

"That is what I say," returned Claudia, smiling. "England is so full of absurd restrictions that, do what you will, you run your head against them."

"You will have to try the colonies," said Anne.

"Or a thousand miles or so of prairies."

Claudia coloured. She had an uncomfortable conviction that her cousin Philippa was mocking.

"It is opportunity I want—not size," she said with dignity, and as she spoke she looked at Harry, who had been listening to the conversation in amazement—mute, except for an occasional muttered "By Jove!" But to her look he answered at once.

"Of course," he said boldly. "There must be dozens of people who want their places set to rights. Would Thornbury do to begin with? If you would come to Thornbury, you could have a free hand, and lots of flowers to do anything with."

Claudia turned her face towards him with a sigh.

"I am not a florist, and I know nothing whatever about flowers, because they don't in the least enter into my scheme. But as to grouping and re-arranging trees, if I can be of any use I shall be happy to do all I can."

"The Thornbury trees!" murmured Philippa.

"And transplanting is so easily managed now," the girl went on, "that really I can't

conceive why people are not more enterprising in trying new effects. If you think of it, how should the planting at haphazard which went on everywhere, produce the best combinations? Whereas, bring art to bear, and the whole falls into a beautiful unity."

He agreed enthusiastically.

"Exactly. I never thought of it before, but now you speak of it, it does seem extraordinary that we should leave so much to chance. I believe ours may be very much improved."

Philippa, with an amused twinkle in her eyes, inquired whether Claudia had found an opportunity of trying her powers.

"At the college, of course. But I am hoping for larger work," said Claudia, eagerly. "It is like everything else, one has to begin in a small way, and get known by degrees."

And, as she spoke, vague shadows floated before Harry Hilton's eyes. He saw a girl's light figure flitting along the grassy rides at Thornbury, transformations, golden sunshine everywhere. The evening was touched to him with a strange strong delight which marked it out from all the other evenings he had ever known.

Claudia herself awoke to enthusiasm and plans. From her window she saw food for both in a stretch of fair wooded country lying in a morning haze, with the silver arrow of the river flashing through the green. Her thoughts immediately busied themselves with planting, thinning, and grouping, and Harry Hilton's cheerful whistle to his dog under her window only suggested a hope that he would carry out his proposal of getting her a free hand at Thornbury. She resolved to talk to her cousins that day, and explain fully how she was desirous of making their house her head-quarters, holding herself absolutely at liberty to go and come as her calling required. She expected argument and disapproval, since it was unlikely that three sisters living on the outskirts of a provincial town, should have sufficiently caught the spirit of the age, and the new development of woman, not to detect strong objections in any career which offered independence to a girl of her age. But against argument she felt herself duly fortified, even thirsted for it as a young soldier might thirst for the first brush of battle. She was the least little bit in the world therefore disappointed that

her announcement of the evening before had not shocked them into stiffer protest, but she told herself that they had not been alone, and that the struggle would be in private.

"You see, Philippa," she found herself saying with eagerness, when after several vain attempts to capture her cousin, she had run her to the earth in the small morning-room which was called the den, "I should be simply wretched if I had nothing to do, and in these days everything is over-stocked. I dare say you feel that it would be more useful to undertake something in the philanthropic line, but I haven't the least inclination for that sort of thing. I should hate to go about collecting rents from poor creatures who can't pay, and oughtn't to be made to; or dragging girls into clubs. I couldn't, indeed!"

"My dear," said Philippa, "please don't set me up as an imaginary nine-pin in order to knock me down flat. I assure you you will discover I haven't nearly so many opinions as you have, for as I grow older, I find a privilege of age consists in putting away pre-conceived notions, and possessing one's self of a receptive mind."

Claudia glanced quickly at her.

"Most people," murmured the girl, "rather object."

"We shan't try you in that way. So long as we ourselves are not improved upon by force, nobody here will interfere with your improving other people. And really I thought Harry's a handsome offer last night."

"Oh," said Claudia, carelessly, "it didn't come from conviction. He thought I was a girl and not bad looking, and that I didn't mean actual business."

Miss Cartwright smiled behind a newspaper; but Claudia's tone was quite frank and free from self-consciousness.

"He's not very brilliant, is he?" she went on. "You like him, I can see, and I don't mean to hurt your feelings, but of course his must be a terribly deteriorating sort of life. Imagine a man caring to knock about with no particular object! I don't myself understand how any man could stand such an existence, or woman either. Of course that is now getting to be recognized, only we unfortunate women, having been in the groove for centuries, find it hard to emancipate ourselves; while men have had all the

advantages of action and movement, so that, luckily for them, a dilly-dallying life strikes lookers-on as a failure, and public opinion forces them into some sort of exertion. That's the secret of their success, and it is horribly unfair upon women, but it's going to be different now!" she exclaimed with enthusiasm.

Philippa groaned.

"If that means we are to have more than ever to do, what will become of us?"

"Oh, this will be work worth the doing!" cried Claudia.

"I see. Well, my dear, do it. As I said before, no one here will say you nay, provided their own liberties are guaranteed to them. Do you begin at once, or is this to be an off day?"

"I am going on the bicycle to try a new brake, and then I may draw out some plans in the garden."

"You will find a comfortable seat under the great beech."

And there, some hour later, Philippa, having finished her accounts and written letters, beheld Claudia established, surrounded by fluttering papers and pencil

sketches, which Harry Hilton carefully guarded from the wind. Miss Cartwright, to tell the truth, was not best pleased at the sight. She bit her lip, and rubbed her left ear.

"Now, is she good enough for him, or is she going to make ducks and drakes of the honestest heart in the county? Which, I wonder? And what an old fool I am to suppose that anything I can do will affect either of them! No, my dear Harry, you must manage for yourself, and if Miss Claudia despises you, you will have to put up with it. She is a great deal too narrow-minded at present to fall in love, and, bless her, with all that fine sweeping scorn of grooves, how little she understands what a broad outlook means! Well, well, it's natural enough, and I am sure the rising generation is delightfully in earnest in views and reforms; only, when it sets to work to reform one's self, human nature is disposed to be nasty. You will be a wiser woman, Philippa Cartwright, if you step on one side, and accept the position. Is that you, Anne? You have come just in time to assist in an act of abdication."

"Who is going to abdicate?"

"I. From to-day I take a back seat."

"Claudia again, I suppose?" said her sister, with a laugh. "My dear Philippa, you will not stay there long. Now, *I* am deeply interested in Claudia."

"Oh, so am I, and so is Harry. Look under the big beech and see for yourself."

Anne looked, and was silent.

"Well?"

"Well"—slowly—"I suppose the old story is too strong for the new woman."

"Of course it is—mercifully," retorted Philippa with impatience, "and, if it comes to that, I say nothing; but my impression is that the new woman by no means shuts out love of admiration, though she calls it by another name, and I don't want Harry to be its victim."

"Oh, she will get over that sort of thing. She is very young."

"There is just one tiresome point in your character, Anne. You can never hear a person found fault with but you must stand up for him or her. Consequence. Sinners like myself can't rest till we have proved our case. Claudia has come here with the

intention of setting us all to rights, and educating us up to her standard ; and if you don't call that conceited—I do."

"I dare say we were all conceited at her age."

"No, I wasn't ; 'nor were you. We should have been put into our proper places quickly enough. However, you have sent my good resolutions to flight with your exasperating charity, for when you arrived I was thinking most piously about our cousin, and had made my mind up to see Harry make a fool of himself, yet say nothing. Now I am all prickles again."

Anne laughed and said no more.

CHAPTER II.

CLAUDIA, sitting under the great beech with Harry Hilton, was becoming interested in her listener, because he showed what she called a recipient mind, meaning that he attended to all she said, and was ready and eager to admit the good effects which were to result to woman from her taking up landscape gardening. How was she to know that his thoughts meanwhile fastened themselves upon the dimple in her cheek, the waving tendrils of her hair, the whiteness of her throat? He would have agreed to almost anything uttered in her young clear voice, for the mere pleasure of hearing her speak, and his own happy and genial nature accepted the charm frankly. She was good, he was sure, and her schemes, whatever they were—and it cannot be said that he quite understood their aim—must be good too.

She wanted her fellow-creatures to be raised, and she had her own ideas as to how the rise was to be effected—he thought her adorable for the wish, and more adorable for telling him about it.

"People will believe me mad," she said. "I am quite used to that. No one is prepared for a woman who has money enough to let her sit still and fold her hands, choosing to plunge into a regular money-making occupation. Half my friends suppose it to be just a fad, and I can't tell you how many letters I get asking me to stay, and assuring me that nobody will object to my amusing myself in their gardens. Amusing myself! Why, I make it a strictly professional matter. If I do anything—even here, for my cousins—it must be for payment. I couldn't oppose the laws of political economy."

"No, no," said Harry, doing his best to struggle after her, "of course not. I think it a capital idea. When a woman has no actual home of her own, naturally she wants occupation."

But this was not right, and Claudia frowned.

"She always wants, or ought to have, her

occupations. Do you imagine that if I married, for instance, I should be content to merge all my interests in ordering dinner, or talking about servants?"

He looked at her puzzled.

"I should continue to work," said Claudia, calmly.

"But——" burst from honest Harry, "you don't mean——? No man who could work would stand his wife having to grind!"

"Why not?" she demanded. "If the woman has learnt her business, why on earth shouldn't she grind, as you call it, as well as her husband?"

"Why? Well, simply, he would be a cad if he allowed it, unless it was absolutely necessary."

Claudia sat up straight, and turned her bright face upon him.

"Ah, these are the behind-hand ideas which we have to live down. Don't you understand that we hold there ought not to be the social differences which have hitherto existed? We maintain that idleness is a sin, and that we ought all to be working men and women. Of course while different degrees of culture and education

handicap some of us, the work cannot be alike, but by degrees that will right itself—By degrees? I believe it is coming by leaps and bounds. I suppose, now," she added, "you think there is a difference between me and—say a charwoman?"

"By Jove, yes!" blurted out Harry, with a laugh.

"Well, I expect if we could project ourselves fifty years or so, you wouldn't find much. That difference is something we have to be ashamed of, and to rectify. We must give the people our opportunities and the chance of reaching a higher level. I dare say that horrifies you?"

"Oh, not at all," he said, struggling between admiration and a sense of the ludicrous. "I am only a little puzzled."

"Yes?" she said graciously; for to puzzle her hearers and then enlighten them, was a fascinating process. "Yes?"

"I was wondering who would do the washing?"

"They, of course. They, just the same, only with higher standards of perfection and better methods. It will have reached the dignity of a fine art by that time."

All his admiration could not keep back an explosive laugh.

"You mustn't be angry," he said, "I think it's splendid—as you put it."

"Oh, I'm not angry," returned Claudia, frankly. "One can't expect to make people look at things from one's own point of view in a minute. You've all of you a thousand prejudices to get rid of to begin with. The great point is if you wish to learn."

"If that's all, I want to—awfully."

"Really?"

"I should think so!"

"Well, then, I don't mind telling you." She was looking gravely at him, her chin resting on her hand.

"That's tremendously good of you."

"Yours is a good face," she went on calmly, with her eyes still upon him; "not clever, you know, but honest and straight. I should think you always tried to do what was right, and that you might be trusted. I'm ready to be friends, if you are." And as she spoke, she stretched out a small white hand with a frank gesture.

Harry Hilton flushed like a girl to the roots of his hair, as he took it.

"You're—you're too good, Miss Hamilton," he stammered.

"Why?" said Claudia, opening her eyes and smiling. "Don't you think it's nice to have friends? I had so many at the college, and I really miss them here. I can't stand writing and that sort of thing—I haven't the time. So that if you like it——"

"Like it!"

"People are so stupid," she went on; "they always talk as if men and women couldn't be friends without fancying themselves in love, or some such nonsense. Several of us agreed that we would make our own lines, and not give way to foolish conventionalities. Why should we not show the world that it is mistaken?"

"Yes," he said more doubtfully. But Claudia was filled with the enthusiasm of her own convictions, and the hesitation of his acquiescence was lost upon her.

"Of course we can, and we will. You and I, for instance, will be good comrades, ready to help each other on either side. If I think you wrong in any matter I shall tell you, and you must do the same by me. Then there are certain things I will never have."

"What are they?" said Harry, hastily.

"If you pay compliments or flatter, the compact's off. I can't stand either one or the other."

"Mayn't I say if I admire anything very much?"

"Certainly not. Is that how you talk to other men? You must try to think that I am another man, and talk as you would then."

"Oh!" groaned Harry. He murmured that it was all new to him. The sudden limit which she put to this delightful offer of friendship was disconcerting, but he reflected that, after all, and for a time, friendship was a step in the right direction. There was no doubt that Claudia meant what she said, even if she spoke with extraordinary simplicity. Now, as she began to gather her fluttering leaves together, he said eagerly, "You're not going?"

"You are," said the girl, with a smile. "We've talked enough."

"We haven't said a word about Thornbury. You'll come to Thornbury, won't you?"

"Is that where you live? Yes, if I can

do anything there. My engagements have not yet begun, and Thornbury may as well start them as any other place." She spoke in a business-like tone, and took out a note-book. "Let me see; how much time will you want, and when?"

"As soon as possible, and for as long as possible."

"That won't do," she said, laying down her book, and speaking coldly. "This is strictly business."

"I'll get my mother to write," said Harry, hurriedly.

Claudia opened her eyes.

"Why trouble her? Surely I can arrange it with you?"

"Well, you see——" he began, and stopped.

"Did you speak?"

"I want to thank you. I think it most awfully kind. Still, I believe my mother would like to write. She's——"

"Yes?"

"We're all of us rather old-fashioned people, you see."

"Oh yes, I see. I think you might even say—very," said Claudia, gaily. "Well,

settle it any way you like. I only warned you because I dare say I shall soon be having plenty of applications and getting my time filled up. And you had better tell her that my terms are ten pounds for one week, or fifteen for a fortnight. It is always well," she added, "to have things square beforehand. Now I must get to work."

Left to himself, Harry Hilton's face broadened into a smile. He lit a cigarette, stuck his hands into his pockets, and sauntered towards the river to see whether any fish were rising. His head was full of Claudia's face, and the flashings and cloudings which swept across it, giving it a charm even more irresistible than mere beauty. He felt a great desire to stand well with her. "If I can get her to Thornbury, and let her go ahead with some of the young trees, she'll be pleased. The mater will ask her, fast enough, if she knows I want it; and I'll get Philippa to tackle—her, and see that she writes a civil answer. I want her to make a good impression. I wonder if I'm falling in love? Well, hang it all! if I am, it's not unpleasant. *I* don't

mind. I hope it won't spoil my fishing. 'Ten pounds for a week, and fifteen for a fortnight'! Oh, I say, I can't tell the mater that, I really can't!"

He was laughing again, for he was not yet so much in love as to fail to see the comic side of Claudia's announcements. His nature was simple and broadly lined, but furnished with good common sense which would prevent his ever making a fool of himself, or being made a fool of by others. Claudia, at this period of her life, admired complexity and unfathomable sayings, and it would have mortified her beyond expression to have realized with what ease Harry pushed aside her small eccentricities as absolutely matters of no moment. They did not affect the attraction he felt a whit more than an unbecoming fashion would have detracted from his admiration for a beautiful face. Then how frank she was, how free from petty ways and shams! He looked at the hand in which her white hand had rested, and his smile became very grave and tender. He stood so long, indeed, that Vic, the fox-terrier, came back and jumped on him inquiringly. Harry patted her, laughed happily

again, and set himself to consider the best method of getting an invitation to Thornbury couched in such terms as should satisfy Claudia's views as to the exigencies of political economy. He made up his mind to go home himself the next morning, and he had a hope that Claudia would express a little regret at his leaving—a hope which was not realized. All that fell from her was a casual remark at dinner.

"Let me know as soon as you can if you want any time kept for Thornbury, for I shall be writing to the college in a day or two."

"And what does the college do?" asked Philippa.

"It acts as a medium. Naturally, people apply to the Principal to recommend a capable person."

"And she would recommend you?"

"Why not? She knows how much or how little I am good for. If she did not think I was up to the work, another would be put in."

"I see."

"But you don't require us to write to the Principal?" said Harry, anxiously.

"You would be wiser if you did," retorted Claudia. "But we do not require it, for we are all at liberty to make our own arrangements."

"And yet remain a sort of society? I think it is very interesting," said Emily. "I always maintain we don't co-operate enough."

"It depends upon what you co-operate for," the girl answered coolly, for she thought Emily's schemes, where they were not mischievous, inadequate, and was resolved to avoid being drawn into their meshes. For Anne she felt that universal attraction which a large power of sympathy creates, and, though she now and then winced under Philippa's trenchant sentences, she enjoyed their humour and blunt directness; but for Emily's best intentions she had no other word than—inadequate, which expressed a good deal of contempt.

As for Harry Hilton, she liked him cordially, but her offer of friendship was made perhaps more with a view to his benefit than her own pleasure. A man with so limited a horizon that he was content to live without a profession or hope of a career, was a man to be profoundly pitied, and stirred, if possible,

to a nobler ambition. If she had realized that he seriously admired her, the idea would only have caused irritation, as that with which she might have regarded any tiresome person who wished to place an obstacle in her way. This impatient anger is not unusual with young girls for whom the world is just unfolding. They are eagerly expectant, time looks infinite, sentiment ridiculous, the lover comes before their hearts are ready, he is in their way, and they call him silly. They will accept him as a comrade, a companion; but the feeling which they are always credited with wishing to inspire is, in many a case, so irksome that they cannot forgive the man who offers it, and he never recovers the ground which that first repulsion lost.

CHAPTER III.

HARRY departed, and Claudia expressed her compassion to Philippa. Philippa grew hot in his defence.

"Of course you like him," said the girl. "I think he is a capital fellow, and that's the pity of it. Yes, yes, I know. He and you are convinced that he will do very well by-and-by to reign at Thornbury, where they will touch their hats and curtsy to him, and he will send down soup when they are ill. That's his line exactly, and it may exist in England a few years longer, but it's on its last legs."

"Aren't you getting rather mixed?" asked Philippa. "The soup, or the line, or what?"

Claudia laughed.

"You know what I mean. The old order. It had its good points, I'm quite ready to admit, but it is over, it must be put away,

and a new situation faced. The People, with a capital letter——"

"Aren't we the People, with a capital letter?" murmured Miss Cartwright.

"Yes, if you join the movement. Otherwise you're only—I beg your pardon, Philippa, but I know you would hate humbug—only a fly on the wheel. You'd be swept along anyway, but you wouldn't help."

"I'm not sure I shouldn't have the best of it, though, except for the dust," Philippa said meditatively. "And poor Harry! I think you are ungrateful to him when he is boldly facing the new situation on your behalf. Think of his mother's face!"

"Ah!" said Claudia, smiling. "Yes, think!"

"Then won't you admit him as one of the People?"

"When he puts his shoulder to the wheel."

"I believe, if he's wise, he'll come and sit by my side. I'm growing more and more to prefer the fly."

"It's natural for you," said the girl. "It is we younger ones who are responsible for the forward movement."

Philippa winced.

"Yes, my dear, I know, and God forbid that I should forget it!" she said, with a touch of wistfulness in her voice. "Only it may surprise you by-and-by to find how quickly you grow old in the eyes of the younger. Sometimes think of that, and don't be in too great a hurry to push the old workers out of the ranks."

Claudia looked uncomfortable.

"I—I didn't mean anything of that sort."

"And I don't mean to be pushed," said Miss Cartwright, recovering herself with a laugh. "I flatter myself that we elders have some staying power. Take Harry, however, by all means, if you can get him to push. I dare say it will be good for him."

"That," returned the girl, "is what I think. Of course, in a sort of way, it is easy enough to get workers—men, I mean," she added, with a fine disdain, "one has but to lift one's little finger. But what is the use of them? They just take it as a new variety of flirting, and haven't an idea beyond. It simply means that so long as it amuses them they will go on, and as soon as they are tired, drop it. Oh, I know!"

"She is weary with the wisdom of the

ages," Philippa said afterwards to Anne. "If you had heard that 'Oh, I know!' and the depth of experience it conveyed! The world is topsy-turvy, frivolity will soon become a virtue of the aged, all the merry-makings and junketings will be reserved for the end of life, we shall be the last left to pipe and dance, while youth regards us scornfully. Claudia depresses me. A hundred wrinkles have grown in my face during the past week. I am ashamed of my poor innocent jestings. If I smile, I look furtively at her to see if she disapproves. What mission has been mine? Have I ever coursed cookery through lectures, or passed the mildest of exams.? I did think I knew something about housekeeping, but Claudia has proved that I work on a wrong basis, and even in that I have to write myself a miserable failure."

"Yet there is a delightful charm about her," her sister said, disregarding this outbreak. "She is wonderfully attractive and bright."

"Bless her, yes! She'll do well enough; she'll find her limitations quite honestly, if not at once."

"And will she go to Thornbury?"

"She's in the mood to go anywhere, only desirous of new worlds to conquer; and she hopes to induce Harry to support the cause, without being idiotic, like other men. She is quite frank with her experiences."

Both sisters laughed.

Meanwhile Claudia easily made herself at home, came and went as she liked, and refused to be bound by the slenderest of social fetters. The kindly placid circle of a cathedral town, desirous—from respect to the Miss Cartwrights—to exercise hospitable duties towards a young girl who had but just fluttered into it, and might be supposed to require encouragement and support, was absolutely paralyzed by the abruptness of Claudia's renunciation of such benefits. The Dean's wife went so far as to ask her to dine, which, considering the plethora of young ladies, and the difficulty of providing each lady with a dignitary, or even a curate, was an attention scarcely short of the heroic. It was the more startling when a note arrived, written in an upright manly hand, and announcing that owing to professional duties, Miss Hamilton would be unable to accept any invitation.

"Professional!" repeated Mrs. Dean, staring at the note.

"Is she a lady doctor?" hazarded her eldest daughter.

"She has not that appearance," said the Dean, with decision.

"But, my dear, she must be something odd. And then to state it in such a bare-faced way! A young creature not older than Rosa! Well, we have done all that could have been expected, and I can only say I am truly thankful she is not coming."

For all this, Claudia came and went contentedly, and if she had heard the speeches would have enjoyed them, as in some degree emphasizing her position. Philippa laughed, and Anne smoothed over where smoothing was necessary, but Emily was ruffled, because before her young cousin's appearance she had been considered to lead the van of progress, and she was afraid that Claudia's Radical theories might be confounded with her own. Besides, Claudia's scorn of leagues and friendly societies and blue ribbons was apt to be scathing; she talked socialism, and combined it with an innocent despotism

contradictory enough to belong only to original woman.

Mrs. Hilton's letter of invitation came enclosed in one to Philippa.

"My dear Philippa (it said),

"Harry tells me you have a young cousin staying with you, who is very fond of what they call landscape gardening, and he seems to think it would amuse her to come to Thornbury. I am sure we shall be delighted to have her here, for it must be dreadfully sad for her to be alone in the world, poor thing! and if she likes flowers we have plenty, though there they are, all in their beds, and I don't know what old Thomas will say if anybody digs them up! However, Harry can always manage. We are going to have a few friends next week, because it makes it more lively for Harry. Captain Fenwick on leave, and Ruth Baynes, and perhaps Helen Arbuthnot will come, so that your little cousin would not find it so dull."

Philippa read this to Anne with great amusement.

"What would our little cousin say if she saw?"

"Minnie has written."

"Not in these terms. Harry would dictate the letter to his mother."

"Harry may dictate, but he will never get Minnie to understand that Claudia is to be paid."

"Oh, well, it will be so amusing to see her awake to the fact, that, upon my word, if it weren't that Emily's feelings would be so dreadfully hurt if I deserted her meeting, I should be tempted to take Claudia—I beg her pardon, travel under Claudia's wing—myself."

"That, my dear," said Anne, laughing, "you couldn't do. Claudia will go on her bicycle, and send her luggage."

Anne was right.

"I don't so much care about bicycling for the pleasure of the thing," Claudia remarked. "But I much prefer it to your cross-country journeys. It is but twenty miles as the crow flies."

"You will lose your way," said Emily.

"With a map and a compass? How could I?"

She made all her arrangements with exactitude, and Emily, who had prognosticated trouble for Philippa, had to own herself mistaken when Claudia wrote all the necessary notes and directions, sent off her luggage in excellent time, and came down in a very neat and well-cut dress.

"You are a woman of business. You

don't leave your friends much to do for you," said Anne, with her kind smile.

"We have learned that much," returned Claudia, pleased. "What a nuisance those poor clinging blushing women must have been, fainting away on a man's shoulder whenever an emergency arrived!"

"Stop, stop!" put in Philippa. "I won't have the heroines of my youth abused. Each generation offers a spectacle for the next to mock at. Don't expect to escape yourself, Claudia."

"Well, they shan't accuse us of helplessness," said the girl, serenely. "Can I do anything for you in the town? No? Then, goodbye."

She settled herself on her bicycle, and rode quietly away. Emily looked vexed.

"She might have taken the other road. Now she will meet them all coming out of the Cathedral."

"Which she will enjoy," said Anne, with a smile. "Come, Emily, own that she looks charming. You are a woman of adventure yourself."

Claudia enjoyed her twenty miles exceedingly. She met and scandalized the Dean's

wife, and made a much more charitable impression upon the Dean himself, who looked after her with a sigh of envy, and a glance at his own gaitered legs. She noted both expressions, laughed, and then her mind flung itself forward with the eagerness with which it always seized upon the future. She pictured Thornbury, its opportunities, its deficiencies, and its altered aspect when she, Claudia, once more took the road back to Elmslie. The people she might meet were not nearly so interesting. The road, however, was neither good nor level, and often she was obliged to confine her attention to its roughnesses. Her real sense of beauty, too, was charmed by the tremulous gladness of the day, soft sunshine veiled in sudden glooms, which yet never became threatening; a hedge-growth rich in ever-varying depths of green; shadows from bordering elms wavering gently on the road, and here and there a gate, a break in the hedge, a twist in the road, opening out some blue distance, not mellow, indeed, with the glory of southern sunshine, but tender as only an English distance can be, and sweet as its remembrance. Claudia was young,

vigorous, exultant. When the road climbed so steeply that she was obliged to get off and push her bicycle, it only made a pleasant change for her young strong arms. Every now and then she consulted her map, or, sitting on a stile, glanced at the ripening corn, watched the busy rooks, and ate, with an excellent appetite, the sandwiches supplied by Anne. It was on one of these halts, on the ridge of a hill steeper and stonier than she had yet encountered, that another rider passed her, a man who looked at her keenly. He was thin, sun-browned, and clean-shaven. She criticized his dress and style of riding, without being able to find faults; she noticed, too, that his bicycle had the latest improvements, such as she would hardly have expected to find in these remote regions. Then she glanced at her map. Thornbury was near—the Thornbury which in the glow of exercise she had almost forgotten—and she guessed that he was on his way there. This interested her merely because she looked forward to asking him some questions about his bicycle, which, she owned with a sigh, was better than her own.

Harry, with half a dozen dogs, was waiting for her at the lodge.

"I knew it must be you whom Fenwick described," he said joyously. "Down, Rob! How splendidly you must have come to be here in this time! I couldn't have done it."

"Of course you couldn't, with that thing of yours," Claudia said disdainfully. "It's abominably clumsy. Captain Fenwick—if that's his name—has a beauty."

"He's a clever fellow; he always has the best thing going," Harry returned with a laugh. "But how jolly it is to have got you here! How's everybody?"

"I don't believe there's much change since you were there last week. Is there ever any change at Elmslie?"

"Oh, isn't there!" he exclaimed, still radiant, and thinking of a change which had meant a good deal in his life. "But, come along; my mother's expecting you, and you'll be glad of tea. The cart has brought your things up from the station all right."

Claudia's welcome was warm. Only Mrs. Hilton and Miss Baynes were in the drawing-room. Mrs. Hilton, a large fair woman, whose mouth, habit and love of her son had

kept in a smiling curve, but whose eyes were faded and weary, showered hospitalities upon the girl.

"My poor husband is a sad invalid, my dear, almost confined to his chair, and sadly crippled, but I hope that at dinner, perhaps——" She broke off vaguely, and Claudia was not long in discovering that Mrs. Hilton's sentences generally remained unfinished. So, probably, did her thoughts, but, as Philippa once said, her kindnesses never. "And how are our dear cousins? It was so good of them to spare you. I am only afraid, my dear, of your finding us—— Well, at any rate, here is Ruth, who is always pleasant."

And she smiled at Miss Baynes, who was handing Claudia her tea.

"Thank you very much," said Claudia's young clear voice; "but you must not think at all of me, because I shall be so busy all the time I am here with the work you are kind enough to entrust to me. And then I have my bicycle, which makes me quite independent."

Mrs. Hilton gazed at her, struggling with novel ideas.

"The work, my dear?" she said vaguely. "But you mustn't talk of it as work. Harry said you were so clever in suggesting things, and, I am sure, if you can amuse yourself with our garden—but——"

Claudia was sitting up, frowning.

"Did not Mr. Hilton explain that my profession was landscape gardening?" she said with dignity.

Harry, who had foreseen the scene, and whose mouth was twitching, broke in cheerfully—

"Yes, mother, you know all about it. It's a splendid thing for Thornbury to get Miss Hamilton here. But we mustn't forget that she's bicycled all the way from Elmslie, and when she has had her tea, I dare say Ruth would take her to her room."

The mere suspicion of any one being tired brought out all Mrs. Hilton's tenderness.

"Of course, I ought to have remembered," she said, with compunction; "but I have such a poor head, my dear, that I leave most things to Harry. Indeed, you must go to your room. But did you really come alone on a bicycle? And Anne was not afraid to

let you! Well, to-morrow you must tell me all about it."

Ruth Baynes, who carried off Claudia, was tall and slight, with a small aquiline nose and a good-tempered expression. It did not take long to discover that she had two brothers whom she adored, and various nephews and nieces, almost equally near her heart. Whatever Claudia said or did was capped by something they had said or done —generally better. She left her at last to peace and a bath, and no one could look fresher or less jaded than Claudia when the dinner-gong sounded.

Mr. Hilton took her in to dinner—a thin querulous man, bent with rheumatism, and walking by the help of a stick. To her surprise, she found that he was a scholar, deeply read and fastidious, as even she could see, in his choice of expressions. The only subject, except that of books, which appeared to interest him, was his health, which excited a constant irritability. It was impossible for her to touch upon her own hobby, because he waved it away at once.

"I know nothing about the place, and I

care less," he said. "Harry is sufficiently fond of it to take that trouble off my shoulders, and I leave it all to him. Virtually he is master. If ever you should have the misfortune to be racked with rheumatism and lumbago, my dear young lady, you would find yourself quite unable to take an active part in life. So I shut myself into my library, and trouble nobody with my miseries."

Claudia thought of Mrs. Hilton's tired eyes, and wondered whether they did not tell a different tale. She found the conversation languishing, and was glad when Captain Fenwick came to the rescue, talking of some classical translation just offered to the world. She glanced at him inattentively, and looked again. If he were Harry Hilton's friend, here, she allowed, was a stronger personality, evident at once, for Harry was fair and sturdy, while this man was wiry, tall, and dark, carrying in his brown features marks of a more adventurous, perhaps impetuous, life. As she looked, his eyes fastened themselves upon hers with a penetration which she, for an instant, resented. The next moment her indifference returned,

and she answered some remark of Miss Baynes', made across the table, with the eagerness which easily awoke in her face, and gave it a constantly varying charm.

Harry was not a man of strategy, but he manœuvred that night to prevent his mother from having anything but general conversation with her guest. The evening was rainy. Mr. Hilton did not appear after dinner, and Ruth Baynes told Claudia they often did not see him for days.

"He is only happy in his library," she added, "and sometimes he cannot even get there. Everything falls on Harry."

"'Everything' can't be very much, I expect," said Claudia. "He must want occupation."

"Oh, do you think so?" Miss Baynes opened her eyes. "My brother always says that the county business alone is enough for any man."

"Perhaps, as to quantity." Her emphasis pointed the remark, but her companion only assented cheerfully, and proceeded to break fresh ground.

"Are you musical?" she asked.

"No. I found there was no time in which

to take up music thoroughly, so I dropped it. What do you do?"

"Play—sing—fiddle. I love it better than anything in the world."

Claudia's face warmed.

"Oh," she said, sitting up and speaking energetically, "then of course you really go in for it. Do you teach?"

"Teach? No," returned the bewildered Ruth. "Why should I?"

"To be of use—to spread your knowledge, to make it something more than a mere amusement. Otherwise of what good is it?"

"Good? I don't know. I think people like it," said Ruth, vaguely.

"Oh!"

Claudia's "Oh!" implied a great deal as Mrs. Hilton hurried towards them.

"Dear Ruth, a little music, please." And as Miss Baynes took glad possession of the piano, Mrs. Hilton murmured on to Claudia, "Ruth is so kind, always ready to play and sing, and Harry likes it so much! Do you play, my dear?"

"No," Claudia said calmly. "At one time I thought of going in for it, but I

hadn't talent enough to make it anything but a grind, with all those Dresden courses to pass."

"Must you have gone to Dresden? I don't think that dear Ruth was ever out of England."

"But I should only have studied it in order to teach."

"My dear!" said kind Mrs. Hilton, distressed. "I am sure that is very sad, at your age and all! Harry did say something, only—I had no idea! I hope, at any rate, you will take a nice holiday here, and—oh, you are much too young, dear, dear, dear!"

"Please don't be sorry," said Claudia, touched yet triumphant. "I have no particular need to work, but we feel that we should cast in our lot with those who have, and that no one has any right to stand idle. That is our position, you know."

"And if I had been a returned convict, I should scarcely have frightened her more," reflected the girl gleefully that night in a last sleepy retrospect which she cast on the evening. For a moment longer her thoughts lingered upon Captain Fenwick's dominant look, then she dismissed him with a yawn.

CHAPTER IV.

SHE awoke early and sprang up at once, fresh as the morning itself, and when she went to the window all her ambitions rushed to the front. What were people compared with those green masses in which she read promise of fame? An old place, with magnificent growth of timber, lay before her bathed in the serenity of a young day. From the lower ground a thin white mist was drifting with filmy nothingness, but the softly swelling uplands lay in beautifully rounded outlines against a clear sky, touched by a delicate sunshine, and here and there broken by depths of cool shade. Claudia looked, and drew a long breath of delight, then dressed rapidly, and was out in the park before any of the windows in the front of the house were unsealed. She glanced rapidly round her. A French

garden, still in shadow, lay on the side of the house, but elsewhere only grass and trees, splendid trees, met her view. So far as she could see, chestnuts and limes predominated, although contrasts were not wanting in fir and cedar. One with the other they grew in stately order, evidently cared for, so far that there was scarcely any crowding, and the big limbs had full play and sweep. Claudia's first impression of entire satisfaction had, by the time she had plunged into some of the leafy intricacies, given way to more complicated criticism. She walked briskly, so as to acquaint herself with the lie of the ground, and pulling out a note-book and pencil as she walked, fell to jotting down possible improvements, chiefly with a view to obtaining distant effects. Time passed rapidly in this congenial occupation, until she heard voices close at hand, and looking up, saw Harry Hilton, a keeper, and many dogs. Harry at once made for her, and Claudia closed her book with an ungrateful sigh, considering that it was he who had obtained for her this splendid opportunity for renown.

"This is most surprising!" he called out joyously.

"Why?" asked Claudia as crossly.

"I thought I had heard you protest against early rising?"

"At Elmslie. I dare say. What was there to do at Elmslie? Every square inch was occupied by somebody."

He laughed. "So it is, when one comes to think of it. I'm a lazy chap, and I suppose I don't mind."

"I suppose you don't. I can't conceive how you can bury yourself here and there, and not do anything bigger in the world," said Claudia, looking at him meditatively. Her tone only expressed wonder, but his face fell.

"Don't you like it, then?" he said, in a disappointed tone.

"Oh!" she exclaimed with a change to enthusiasm, "do you mean this place? It is simply delightful. It holds the greatest possibilities, and I am longing to begin. It is far, far more beautiful than I expected; but of course it may be made more beautiful still."

He nodded. He was looking at her, at the eager light in her eyes, at her smiling lips, at the dimple so absurdly attractive.

This, he was sure, was what Thornbury wanted. She went on—

"May I really cut freely? Your father will not object?"

He winced. Claudia did not ask whether he cared, yet to no one at Thornbury was every stick and stone of the old place so dear as to himself. His father buried himself in his books and his infirmities, and his mother saw everything through the medium of her son's eyes. But there was not a tree, nor a patch of shadow on the grass, nor tangle of underwood, nor green sweep of bracken, nor haunt of squirrel, which Harry did not know and love.

"He won't object," he said hesitatingly. "But—when you think you must cut, you won't mind, will you, telling me beforehand?"

"Oh no," she said, "not in the least. I know people have fancies and prejudices, and I should not like to hurt them, of course. Now will you please go away?"

"Go away! Why? Have I offended you?"

"Offended me? Why should you think so?" said Claudia, opening her eyes in frank

wonder. "But you forget that I am here professionally, and have my work to do."

"You're not going to work all day!" he exclaimed in dismay.

"I hope so. Please don't misunderstand. I'm not here on the same footing as your other guests—as Miss Baynes, for instance. I have only come for a purpose."

"What on earth has that to do with it?"

"Everything. You really must try to see what I mean."

"I can't," he muttered.

"Oh yes, you can. Suppose, for instance, that I were an artist come down to paint your mother's portrait. Then you'd expect me to stick to my work, wouldn't you?"

Claudia spoke sadly and temperately, as one might to a thick-headed child.

"No artist would paint all day," he persisted obstinately.

"Nor am I going to work all day. I suppose I shall eat and drink and sleep——"

"And amuse yourself."

"Yes, and amuse myself, when there is nothing better to do. But even while he was doing all this, the painter would have an eye to business; he would be studying your

mother's expression, and little ways, and characteristic movements."

"Oh, well, if that's what you'd like, I can take you all over the place, and show you everything," said Harry with renewed cheerfulness. "Nobody knows it better than I do. There are some old oaks behind the house——"

"Thanks," said Claudia, crushingly; "but I prefer to work out ideas by myself. Do you know you have wasted a great deal of my time this morning?" She looked at her wrist as she spoke. "There is only half an hour to breakfast, and I must do the best I can with that."

He made another effort.

"You'll lose your way."

She escaped with a laugh.

"If I do, I give you leave to come and hunt for me."

Harry stood looking after her, mingled feelings in his heart. Each time that he saw her he seemed to like her better, and this morning her fresh charm, the light in her eyes, and the general harmony which existed between her youth and that of the day, the sky, and the woods, affected him strongly.

He found it, too, very pleasant to see the woman he was beginning to love better than any one else in the world, in the place which was so dear to him, and her admiration for his old home gave him keen satisfaction.

But there were damping reflections. He had enough shrewd common sense to be aware, not only that Claudia flung no glance in the direction where he would have had her look, but that her friendliness was, to say the least, pitying. He had heard her inveigh—with the vigour she was apt to put into her lightest words—against the drones who have no purpose in the world, and something in her manner had made him fully understand that she looked on him as a drone. He felt this hard, although he did not resent it, for he was not the man to talk about himself, and she could not be expected to realize how incapable his father was of managing the estate. But he was afraid it would always weigh with her, and the thought caused him great pain. He saw no way of altering her opinion, unless it came to her spontaneously, and in the light of a discovery of her own, for no one could know

Claudia, even for a week—and he remembered with surprise that he had not actually known her much longer—without perceiving that she preferred her own judgments to those of other people.

It need not be thought, however, that, because Harry saw difficulties ahead, he took them to be insuperable, or even particularly alarming. Young, sturdy, healthy, he was the last man in the world to become the prey of morbid fancies. He could not forget that moment in which her hand had lain in his. He had her at Thornbury, which was present joy; she was pleased with the place, and though he had no high opinion of his own attractions, he was quite ready to hope that the place might count for something, and told himself—it must be owned with a pang—not to be such a fool as to begrudge her a free hand among the trees. Then, his reflections having mounted his spirits high, he whistled cheerily to the dogs, stuck his hands into his pockets, and walked towards the house, heroically resisting all temptations to waylay Claudia.

She arrived rather late.

"Here you are, my dear," said Mrs. Hilton,

kindly. "How have you slept? Are you rested? Watkins said you would not let her do anything for you."

"Thank you," said Claudia, pleasantly. "I always manage for myself." Her morning's round had put her into the best of humours, and she was fresh and smiling, but before breakfast was half over, longing to escape to the work which no one appeared disposed to regard gravely. Captain Fenwick, who was last of all, and dropped into the empty chair by her side, made no attempt to conceal his amusement.

"You have been round the place already! Wonderful energy! And when are you really going to begin? Mayn't we all come and help?"

"Do you think you could?"

"I am sure I should be a very valuable adviser."

"About as much so as I should be if I attempted to drill your men. I suppose that is the sort of thing you do?" said the girl, so quietly that he looked at her.

"I am afraid that is a neat way of hinting that I should mind my own business."

Her eyes began to dance.

"Perhaps."

"You cover me with confusion. But, indeed, you are mistaken. I am quite willing to learn."

"Only I did not come here to give lessons. So don't you think we had both better keep to what we know?"

He was piqued. He was accustomed to find himself popular, which, put into other words, meant courted, by women. From Claudia's manner it was plain that the honour of becoming his instructress did not appeal to her. If she had not really been very pretty he would have turned away; as it was, he said in a tone of mock humility—

"What cruelty! Do you refuse even to throw me a few crumbs?"

"Oh dear no! Do they ever do any one any good? However, if they please you, and you find them about—— May I ask for the mustard?"

Mrs. Hilton's voice was heard, addressing Claudia.

"Harry tells me you will like to have your morning to yourself, and I dare say you have letters to write, haven't you, my dear? Anne will be wanting to hear how you

got on yesterday. But after luncheon you must come for a drive, and later perhaps a little tennis? Or golf? Harry says that is what every one plays now, and I believe there are some links—isn't that the name? or something——"

"Thank you," said Claudia. "I only care about cricket."

"Ah!" said Mrs. Hilton, vaguely—"to look on at matches?"

"Oh no! To play. It seems to me the one game worth anything. But, then, I never tried football."

She glanced at her hostess, delighted to see her startled face. But Harry, who was on the watch, broke in cheerfully.

"Cricket? Oh, of course. Heaps of girls play nowadays." (He did not add that his opinion of their play was low.) "I'm afraid there's nothing good to offer you, but Hurst is sending over an eleven to-morrow to play Thornbury."

"Thank you," said Claudia again, and more coldly.

"And we shall all be expected to look on, I suppose?" remarked Miss Baynes. "We do at Walter's. He and his boys are such

first-rate cricketers, they are always in demand."

She looked round enthusiastically, but no one appeared struck with the statement.

"Other people's relations are even one degree less interesting than other people's ailments," murmured Captain Fenwick, so that only Claudia heard. He went on, "Well, you've had your choice of amusements."

"I didn't come here to be amused."

"And you have scorned them all, pointedly."

"I!" Her face dimpled.

"Don't you ever try to gloss over your feelings? You make me afraid to offer a suggestion."

"Why?" said Claudia, looking at him with disconcerting frankness. "As it happens, there is something you shall do for me." He smiled. "I want to look at the brake of your bicycle, it seemed to act better than mine."

"When? This morning?"

"Certainly not. It must be in play-time." She turned, for Mrs. Hilton was speaking again.

"Will half-past three suit you, my dear? Ruth, I know"—nodding at Miss Baynes—"will see that Mr. Hilton has all he wants, and Harry—Harry, won't it be a good plan for us to call at the station for Helen? Yes, I thought so; we will do that, and come home in good time for tea."

Miss Baynes asked whether Miss Arbuthnot was expected.

"Oh, didn't I tell you? So like me! Yes, she is coming for a week or two—for as long as she likes to stay," she added hospitably. "Helen almost belongs to the house, so that she will be able to help Harry."

"To help Harry?" repeated Claudia in an undertone.

"To amuse you," chuckled Fenwick.

"Oh!" There was profound scorn in the "Oh!"

"It's a little the case of *toujours perdrix*, isn't it?" he went on. "But Harry's the best fellow in the world."

"You, too!" She thought impatiently of Elmslie. "Do let us take his virtues for granted by way of a change, and tell me about Miss Arbuthnot. Who is she?

And what is she like?" A new girl was a far more interesting subject to her than any mere man; the girls at the college, and the lines they took or might be expected to take, had been fertile objects of speculation for their fellow-students.

"She," said Fenwick, slowly, "is a daughter of Lord Ambleton. What is she like?" He hesitated. "How am I to answer?"

Claudia opened her eyes.

"Why? Is she so inscrutable?"

"Inscrutable? Yes, perhaps. But just then I was reflecting on the difficulties of describing a woman to a woman without setting her against her."

"Why?" asked the girl again, coolly. "I suppose you mean that women are jealous?"

"I shouldn't venture on such plain speaking."

"I wish you would," she said impatiently. "I hate people to be afraid to come round a corner without peeping first. As for being jealous, I don't agree. I think women are more ready to admire women than men men."

"Of course if you think so——"

"Please don't pay silly compliments. Disagree as much as you like, and then the thing may be argued out."

"Never!"

"What do you mean?"

"Everything in the world has been argued, and nothing ever has been, or will be, argued out."

Claudia paused. "But that would strike at the root of all conviction," she said doubtfully.

"Oh, by no means. Yours—excuse me—is a feminine leap at conclusions. Do you really suppose that half the convictions in the world are capable of being proved by argument?"

"Then," she said, "I don't see how they can be convictions."

"Well, experimentalize upon your own. If you are fair I suspect you'll find more than half are backed up by nothing better than a little prejudice and a little—— No, I won't say the other thing."

"Do," said Claudia, flushing. No one had ever spoken to her so plainly before, yet after what she had said, she could not have the satisfaction of showing her displeasure.

She added quickly, "Though you know nothing of me."

"I've only a conviction. Are you going?"

"Yes, indeed; I've wasted time enough."

"Even workers must eat!" returned Fenwick, maliciously, as he rose.

CHAPTER V.

MISS ARBUTHNOT, when she appeared, awoke no remembrances of the college. She was a woman of past thirty, large, massive, and sleepy-looking. Claudia saw the meeting between her and Captain Fenwick, and was struck by the idea that they rather disliked each other. No two persons, indeed, could have presented a greater contrast.

After the first morning, Fenwick exerted himself to give a personal touch to the conversations he held with Claudia, and it surprised him to find how much he cared to speak to her, since, as he reflected, it was very like running your head against a stone wall. Until now he had always avoided women with opinions and prejudices; it is true that he had not hitherto met them accompanied by a dimple, or eyes which

grew brilliant in their eager enthusiasm, but the real attraction lay in the girl's absolute indifference. He was so accustomed to impress that, when he failed, he was like a hypnotist fighting against a strong will, there was something which had to be overcome. That Claudia should come and go without casting a glance in his direction, that no gleam of pleasure lit her face when he chose the seat next to hers, was an affront to his vanity. Almost unconsciously he began to study her more attentively, and to mark her likes and dislikes. As she announced them with careless freedom, this was not difficult, but it was less easy to please her, even when he had found them out.

Harry Hilton arrived at the same rueful conclusion by another road.

Heroic were the sacrifices he made in order that Claudia's plans might sweep freely in whatever direction she chose to extend them. There were two limes which she condemned—not, as she owned, without regret—and after the order had been given for their downfall, Harry rode away immediately after breakfast, and did not return until dinner-time. He told himself that he

was an idiotic fool, but, do what he would, all day the broad shadow of the great branches haunted him, and he heard in fancy every stroke of the axe. Claudia, who was unusually well satisfied with her day's work, greeted him eagerly.

"You don't know what a splendid opening we've got. I am longing for you to see and acknowledge it."

"They are down?" said poor Harry, trying to speak cheerily.

"Yes, quite." Then she laughed. "I wasn't going to wait, when you might have changed your mind, for you did not altogether agree with me, you know. But I was certain it would be the greatest improvement imaginable, and, even if it was a sacrifice,"—she was still smiling—"art is made up of sacrifice, isn't it?"

"Is it?" he said humbly.

"Why do I talk to him like that, when he hasn't a glimmer of understanding about art or anything beyond the commonplace, poor fellow?" reflected Claudia. Aloud she said, "When you see it to-morrow morning, you will be glad that I was firm."

And then she nodded and went away.

In an armchair close by, Miss Arbuthnot was sitting. She looked lazily up.

"Harry," she said, "you might take me in to dinner for once instead of your father. All my wits have gone out into the suburbs this evening, and as you never had any, you won't miss them."

"All right," he agreed, rather dejectedly. "There's the gong."

He hoped to sit next Claudia, but Fenwick was too quick for him.

"Never mind," said Miss Arbuthnot, "or if you do mind, bear it. Life, like art, is made up of sacrifices, and for once you might put up with me, particularly as I, too, should prefer you to be somebody else."

"Who?" He stared.

"Oh, you expect too much. Do you suppose it is the vicar? I am not going to talk about myself; when I do I like to have my wits at home, and, as I told you, they are out visiting. You are a much more simple subject, and as we are old friends, almost as old as you and the lime trees, I should like to know why you are allowing that little girl to ride you rough-shod?"

He did not answer, and she asked, with a touch of anxiety—

"Now, Harry, you're not pretending to be affronted with me?"

"Affronted? No."

"But you've tumbled into love?"

"Is there anything surprising in that?" he said in rather an injured tone.

She took no notice of the question beyond remarking, with a sigh—

"No, I don't in the least believe in heredity."

"What are you up to now?" he inquired resignedly.

"If there were anything in it, don't tell me that, after centuries of falling in love, and out of it, man would not have developed some sort of understanding how to do it."

"That's evolution," said Harry.

"Imagine your knowing! Well, whatever it is, does nothing tell you what is labour lost?"

He looked at her. "You mean I've no chance?"

"You put things so baldly! Can't you see for yourself that nobody has any chance—yet? Your Claudia is launched on a career;

it mayn't be a big one, but for concentration and determination, or any other five-syllabled things, commend me to a young woman on a career. She hasn't a thought to fling on anything else."

"It won't last," he said stubbornly.

"That's the first gleam of intelligence you've shown. No, it won't last, because there are tendencies, eternal tendencies, in us, which decline to be ignored, and one day she will have to face them. But not yet."

"Fenwick gets on with her a lot better than I do," remarked Harry, with apparent inconsequence.

There was a pause.

"He has more experience," she said lightly.

"Ah, you don't like him, you don't do him justice. He's an awfully clever fellow, quite different from the Johnnies she'd generally meet. It's natural she should prefer him."

He spoke dejectedly, and she laughed.

"I've never set you up on a pinnacle for admiration, have I? It *is* quite natural, only it isn't the case. He may be occupied with her," she added a little bitterly, "but at present she's taken up with herself."

Harry fired.

"Oh, you women! Now, I call it an awfully plucky thing to break away and strike out a line for herself."

"Oh, so do I," said Helen, with a sigh of unexpected meekness. "It's like bicycling—a splendid prerogative of youth. All that I'm trying to impress upon you is that while it lasts, it's absorbing. And much gratitude I get!"

"Oh, I'm grateful. Only——"

"What?"

"You're clever, and you laugh at everything, until it's a bit hard to find out what you mean. I wonder why you say all this?"

"For old acquaintance sake," she said quickly and kindly. "When things become serious I'm not such a bad sort."

"And you'll really be on my side?"

"Of course I will. Let me see the *menu*, and don't cheer up so preposterously. What I want you to realize is that nothing, no one, can be of any use just now. I don't expect you to believe me, and you'll probably rush in and blunder the whole affair; I only warn you that if you're wise you'll give your young woman time to trip along cheerfully on her

career, and to find out for herself that it isn't all she expected. And I'm afraid, I'm very much afraid, this may cost you more lime trees."

"I don't care a hang what it costs!"

"You mustn't use bad words, or I shall have your mother down on me."

His spirits rose.

"You haven't told me what you think I'd better do."

"Where's the use, when you'll do the contrary? My endeavour will be to introduce a little common sense on your side, and a little romance on hers. Be thankful for one thing."

"What?"

"That she's not a market-gardener. Market-gardening excludes romance. I defy you to make any running over a lot of cabbages. Now, trees, dewy lawns, grass rides—upon my word, they should have possibilities. Don't get cross. I'm quite serious."

Something interrupted, but before dinner was ended, Harry, who had apparently been storing observations, said in a low voice—

"I say, do you expect me to look on and see Fenwick make all the running?"

There was another momentary hesitation on Miss Arbuthnot's part before she said with a groan—

"Oh, the density of the male mind! Won't you understand that all Miss Hamilton's aspirations are bound up in that pocket-book to which I see her refer when she has got rid of you all? On the day the pocket-book disappears, I shall hope for you. Meanwhile, minister to her career; that is the best you can do, and all you can do. And it is so funny, that you ought to be extremely obliged to me for treating it seriously."

He looked at her and laughed, and showed his trust in her discernment by avoiding Claudia for some days almost too pointedly. He rode away each morning and did not come back for hours, buried himself in the study with his father, or took Fenwick off to the next town. Mrs. Hilton became uneasy for the amusement of her guests, and it was in vain that her son assured her they preferred being left to their own devices. Helen was tired after a London rush.

"I am not talking about Helen," she said almost fretfully. "She is very well able to

look after herself. And Ruth can make herself at home anywhere. But there is little Miss Hamilton."

"Take my word for it, mother, she likes to go her own way."

"My dear, you can't know about a young girl, and I am so afraid she thinks we may consider her to be in a sort of derogatory position here. I do wish you would let me explain to her, poor thing, that we are delighted to have her, and that she can do just as she likes if it's any amusement to her. I was afraid you might be vexed about the trees, but if you and your father are satisfied, it is all quite right."

Harry laughed.

"Oh, she doesn't in the least suppose she's doing anything derogatory. Things are changed in these days, mother, and Miss Hamilton wants you to understand that her being here is a simple matter of business."

Mrs. Hilton lifted her hands helplessly.

"My dear Harry, it can't be! Of course if the poor girl is so sadly poor——"

"She isn't."

"—Or if she has taken it into her head to amuse herself——"

"Don't let her hear you!"

"—One would do everything one possibly could. But you can't expect me to have a pretty young creature like that here, and not try to make it pleasant for her, and we all know what girls like, and how pleased they are with attention, poor things! I really think, Harry, she ought not to be left so much alone."

He dug his hands into his hair, and laughed again—not quite naturally.

"Well, we'll see."

But though he said little, his heart was leaping. Women were women all the world over, and why should not his mother be as right as Helen Arbuthnot? Might he not in these last days have been playing the fool, and losing ground? It suddenly struck him—and he flushed at the thought—that he had been wanting in pluck, hanging back, and letting Captain Fenwick amuse himself—for he knew him well enough to be convinced that he meant nothing more. He jumped up, and went to a window which overlooked the small French garden. Beyond it the ground swept softly upwards towards a belt of fine trees, and beneath them Claudia

was standing bare-headed, her hands clasped behind her. Harry looked, hesitated, turned away, and turned again. It was too much. Helen Arbuthnot and her counsels of prudence were flung on one side, he put his hand on the window-sill and vaulted out, enthusiastically followed by Vic and Venom, the terriers.

Claudia had been working for an hour with profound satisfaction to herself. Perhaps she had never been so happy in her life as in these last days at Thornbury. The sense of importance, the freedom from control, the range of ever-extending possibilities, were delightful, but beyond and above these causes for satisfaction there was the joy of youth, and a freshness which is its pleasant attribute, and puts it into delightful harmony with open-air nature. For the present it was as Miss Arbuthnot had divined; she needed nothing else, and would resent an unwelcome intrusion of disturbing elements. It was no less true that at some near time, and possibly at an unexpected moment, this tranquillity might be shattered, but by whom and when was as yet a problem. Was it by Harry, who now came towards her, walking as

quickly as if he had just successfully accomplished the aim of a day's search? She put up her hand.

"Two hundred feet by thirty," she remarked meditatively.

"How are you getting on? Don't you want something? Mayn't I come and help?" He put the questions breathlessly.

"Please don't interrupt. At last I do think I have got the proportions right."

"But I shan't interfere with them?"

"You do rather." She glanced at him with a laugh of which she immediately had the grace to feel ashamed. Harry's proportions might not be the best in the world, but she liked him very much indeed, and owed him kindliness. "You may stay if you won't interrupt."

"I won't."

"Then, look here," she said. "I'm going to sacrifice all these low shrubs, straighten that curve, cut down two or three unimportant trees, and—do you know what will come of it?"

"Not in the least," he said with his eyes on her.

"Guess."

"I can't."

She reflected impatiently that he was really dreadfully dense.

"You will see the Marldon hills."

"Really?" What did he care for all the hills in the country?

"Yes, really," she exclaimed triumphantly. "I thought it might be so, and I have proved it. Why, it will be the most beautiful view in the whole neighbourhood, and I don't think any one could have believed it possible."

Her eyes sparkled enthusiastically, her hat lay on the ground before her, and the wind tossed her dark hair. Harry looked at her, worshipping, with a sudden contempt for Miss Arbuthnot. What did his heart tell him? What was earth and air crying out? What were the birds singing? Love—love—love—and he—he only—must remain dumb, dull, cowardly. His voice shook with the effort he made to keep back the universal cry.

"Aren't you tired? St—stop for a little while," he stammered.

If she had been thinking of him, or even if her mind had been taken up less with

her own interests, she could not have failed to notice something hoarse and strained in his voice, but she heard nothing.

"Not exactly tired," she said lightly; "but perhaps—well, I do feel that I have done a good morning's work, and I am glad, because when this is finished, I must be going on."

"Going on! What for?" he exclaimed so abruptly that this time she looked at him in surprise. But she did not see, and laughed.

"Why, to work, of course. Thornbury is a fascinating old place——"

"You like it?" he interrupted eagerly.

"Of course I do." She felt she owed him a tribute. "I can't tell you how much I have enjoyed what I have done here, but—one comes to an end. You don't want me to cut down all your trees, do you?"

With that his head whirled.

"Sit down," he said, pointing to a fallen trunk on which she had already experimented, and Claudia, still unsuspecting, seated herself, pushing back her hair with both hands—a trick she had.

"I suppose I am rather tired, after all,

and certainly hot," she allowed, drawing a deep breath; "but what delightful work it is!"

"You've really enjoyed it?"

"Of course I have, and you have let me alone, which people can't understand is what one wants. I am going next to a place called Huntingdon Hall. Friends of Captain Fenwick have got it, and he says it requires putting to rights terribly, and they haven't an idea how to set about it. I have heard from Lady Wilmot and have sent her my terms. I expect it will be quite straight sailing. Captain Fenwick says so."

He scarcely heard. Love, love, love—everything was singing it tumultuously.

"Claudia!" he cried.

CHAPTER VI.

THE tone in which Harry cried "Claudia!" pierced through even her unconsciousness. She looked at him, startled. He was breathing heavily, altogether unlike himself.

"I must speak," he said. "Haven't you guessed how I love you?"

"You?" she exclaimed in unmistakable amazement. "What can you be thinking of?" and something in her manner brought back his self-control.

"There's nothing so wonderful about it, is there?" he said slowly. "I suppose it began from the first moment I saw you, and it has gone on. Can't you give me a little hope? I know you're a lot too good for me——"

"Oh, don't say any more, don't!"

She tried to rise, but he laid his hand on her arm.

"I want you to listen—this once. I

suppose I've taken you by surprise. I didn't mean to do that. I thought you must have seen all along——"

"I never saw!" interrupted Claudia indignantly. "I'm very angry with you."

"If you don't care for me now," he went on, unheeding, "don't you think you might some day? You like the old place——"

"The place!" She pushed away his hand, and her eyes were flaming. "Did you suppose I should want to marry a place? Oh, what nonsense this all is! If I could make you understand how much I dislike anything of the sort!"

He laughed ruefully.

"I think I understand. I was a fool—as usual."

"Don't say 'as usual'!" exclaimed the girl, still frowning. "I hate to hear you always running yourself down, and I hate to hear you trying to talk sentiment. We are excellent friends. Do be satisfied with that, and be nice, as you were before."

She waited, but he was silent.

"Well, then, if you won't," she said, lifting her eyebrows, "I'd better go back to the cousins."

"No," he said hurriedly, "don't go. I shan't torment you."

Claudia glanced doubtfully at him. In spite of her displeasure, the situation struck her as more comical than serious, and though she wished he had not been silly, she did not for a moment realize that she was causing him more than a passing disappointment. Besides, the view which remained to be opened, the improvements which had so entirely filled her imagination, and fired her ambition, were really of far more importance than this ridiculous situation, and if she were to go away before she could carry them out—what a collapse, what a feminine collapse! People would guess, she supposed, because people were so foolish, and so determined to make out that a girl's head could contain no ideas beyond those idiotic ones which she had just been invited to share; and they would all triumph, and say of course that was always the aim and end of a woman's efforts. Yet something within her persistently urged her to go, so that she felt cross, and naturally vented the crossness upon Harry.

"I do so wish you would not have talked

nonsense!" she exclaimed at last. "I did want to stay until I had finished what I have thought out, and it would have been the most wonderful improvement to the place! If I could just arrange it, and show you where to plant a few copper beeches——"

Harry's laughter came readily, and it came now.

"You mustn't think of leaving. If any one has to go, it will be I."

"And if you go," said Claudia discontentedly, "no one else knows a thing about the trees. Well, I will stay on till Wednesday, if you promise to talk sense, and forget these absurd ideas of yours. They come because you have so little to do. Why on earth don't you get away, and find some real manly occupation?"

He hesitated.

"My father's very infirm. I left the army because he wanted me."

"I should think you might do something."

She had gathered her things together, and was walking towards the house. There may have been an unacknowledged effort to keep the conversation at arm's length from

herself, or it may have been vexation with her companion which raised a keen desire to rebuke him for his shortcomings. Certain it is that her tone was scornful.

"Perhaps," he answered.

"For a man or woman to be without occupation is so uninteresting, to say the least of it," continued his mentor, "that I would rather break stones on the road."

He was silent, hardly hearing. He was looking at the round softness of her cheek, and wondering whether many men felt as miserable as he. Swiftly before his eyes rose a vision of Claudia wandering about the park at Huntingdon with Captain Fenwick by her side, and he straightened himself with something so like a groan that he glanced hurriedly at the girl, fearing to have annoyed her. But she was looking straight before her, relieved to see Helen Arbuthnot strolling towards them from the grass ride.

"At least ten people are crying out for you," was her greeting to Harry. "Your mother, and your mother's maid, and the mother of the footman, and a sick bailiff. These are the most importunate, but there are five others dancing round. He must

go," she went on to Claudia, "but if you really have an idle moment to spare, you might bestow it on me. I collect other people's."

Claudia did not much care for Miss Arbuthnot, whom, with some reason, she suspected of ridiculing her, but at this minute she would have joyfully jumped at any means of escape.

"Was that why you came to Thornbury?" she asked bluntly.

"Was it? I don't know; and I never answer questions, because they recall acrostics. Come back to the grass ride." The grass ride remained unchanged. A broad strip of turf, and on either side tall slender trees springing from a wavy undergrowth of bracken; a ride shady through the hottest summer, yet with the sun filtering down sufficiently to fling broken lights on the close cool grass. Miss Arbuthnot stood still as they reached it, and looked in either direction. "It is an enchanting spot," she said.

"Ye-e-s," agreed Claudia doubtfully. "But it might be tremendously improved."

"I dare say. I hate improvements, whether

in people or places. They destroy sentiment."

Up jumped Claudia on her stilts. "I can't understand any one not wishing for the best."

"No? That's your youth. It's the same sort of rage which sets people scraping ruins, when such charming weeds vanish! Half the attraction of everything consists in its little defects."

Miss Arbuthnot spoke with extreme laziness, quite indifferent to the impression she produced; and the girl, who hated to be reminded of her youth, and felt as if her own efforts were belittled, was provoked.

"If the world thought as you do," she said gravely, "there would be no advancement, no gain."

"And how enjoyable!" sighed Miss Arbuthnot. "Are you going to cut down many more of poor Harry's favourite trees?"

Claudia coloured.

"I have only cut what was necessary," she said with still greater dignity.

"From your point of view—yes. But from his?"

"Does he object?"

"He? Oh no, he knows better."

"I don't think you understand," said Claudia impatiently. "I came here to try to make the place more beautiful——"

"It does well enough," murmured Miss Arbuthnot, with a glance at the deep fern beside them.

"You don't suppose I had the trees cut down except where it would be an improvement? And of course Mr. Hilton is glad to —have those improvements." She felt her speech feeble, and it made her angry.

"Of course. I am afraid what is good for one is often disagreeable, but, as you say, a supporting sense of virtue remains. Harry is such a capital fellow that he deserves all he can get."

It should be noted that Miss Arbuthnot, accustomed to be regarded, had no idea that Harry had broken loose, and run his stubborn head against a wall, or she would not have chosen such a moment for singing his praises. Claudia was too young, or too ignorant of love, to feel kindly towards a man for falling in love with her, and was only annoyed at what she considered a commonplace episode in what she intended

to be anything but a commonplace career. As yet she had no conception of the true proportion of things, and dismissing love and such trifles as mere hindrances, her companion's words irritated her the more against Harry.

"Oh, he will get all he deserves, no doubt," she observed airily. "That kind of character doesn't want much." Then she had the grace to blush, and to go on hurriedly, "He will be always quite contented to vegetate at Thornbury, stroll about with his gun, and make an ideal magistrate —or what people consider ideal, which does just as well."

Miss Arbuthnot stopped to whisk away a wasp.

"Do you find fault with your picture?"

"Well, it doesn't seem very interesting, that's all."

"I like discussing other people's characters," said Miss Arbuthnot lazily; "I find it much simpler than meditating upon one's own. So you think Harry commonplace? Why?"

"Why? How can it be otherwise? He has no ambition, no aims beyond Thornbury,

no work. A man who doesn't work is a wretched being."

"Has he told you he doesn't work?"

"One can see for one's self, I suppose?" Claudia said, with a fine scorn; and Helen shot a glance at her as if she had wakened up.

"Oh no, you can't. When you are older you will learn that you can never trust your eyes. Go and ask the bailiff, and the keeper, and the gardeners."

"*That* kind of work!"

"Well, we can't all be landscape gardeners. If we were, I suppose the estate would have to be kept going, or there wouldn't be much good in beautifying it?"

"Agents," retorted Claudia.

"Perhaps. But some people have an old-fashioned prejudice that when a father and mother are old and infirm, there are things which even an agent can't do. Harry *is* old-fashioned. I have often told him he ought to be more up-to-date."

There was a silence. Then Claudia remarked in a slightly altered voice—

"He has never said anything to make one suppose living here was any sacrifice."

"Or that he felt the loss of his trees. Yet, I assure you, he has more than once ridden miles to avoid the crash of doom."

Another pause.

"I had really better go away at once," Claudia exclaimed impatiently. "Why did they ask me to come? It was his suggestion—not mine. And it is ridiculous. The place is ever so much improved by a little thinning."

"Oh, I dare say. I'm not defending Harry, only when people can never be induced to blow their own trumpets, I feel irresistibly impelled to produce a blast. Let us talk about some one else. Captain Fenwick, for instance. Neither of us need blow for him."

"He's amusing," remarked Claudia indifferently.

"There's a tribute!" said Miss Arbuthnot, looking at her between half-closed eyelids.

"And he rides a bicycle better than any one I know."

"So that you are less hard on him than on poor idle Harry?"

"Hard? I don't know. He idles too, but——"

"More impressively."

"He has been useful in getting me a commission to work at Huntingdon. He says it's in dreadful order, for Sir Peter has only just succeeded, and of course the worse it is, the better for me."

This time the silence lasted longer. Then Miss Arbuthnot spoke without turning her head—

"He goes there too, I suppose?"

"Oh yes! He thought"—she laughed—"that I might feel lost among strangers. One has to get over that sort of thing when one takes up a profession. But he meant it very well, and perhaps if he is there, they will be less shy of me. That's what generally happens, because people can't forget their old tradition that a woman mustn't be professional. With a man it's taken as a matter of course."

"And a man takes it as a matter of course," put in Helen. She was tired of her companion's girlish egotism, and administered her thrust sharply. "But she won't see," she reflected.

Claudia did see, and coloured.

"I dare say I am tiresome," she said frankly. "At the college they declared

that no one rode their hobbies to death as I did. Only"—she drew a deep breath—"these are wonderful times, aren't they? And how can one take one's part in the movement without enthusiasm?"

"And pray, where are you moving?" asked Miss Arbuthnot. Then she changed her tone. "Was there ever such a heavenly day? I'm glad you've spared the grass ride. There's nothing like it at Huntingdon, whatever Captain Fenwick may say. When do you go?"

"On Wednesday."

"Does he take you?"

"I suppose we shall bicycle there together. I shan't object, because he is a very clever rider, and can show one all sorts of useful dodges."

"Oh, he is very clever!" agreed Miss Arbuthnot. She added quickly, with a touch of scorn—"and insatiable."

Claudia did not catch the oddly chosen word, and certainly would not have understood it.

"Well, here he is rather refreshing," she allowed, "because he has been about the world, and can talk; but, after all, men

always strike me as uninteresting. Don't you think one more often meets with original women?"

"At the college, of course."

"Oh, at the college they were delightful."

"If," Miss Arbuthnot said idly, "you want a definition of advancing years, I should say it was made up of modifications. I've had my theories too, though you mightn't believe it, but I find the hard edges almost gone, and my opinions grown hazy. One still, however, remains—that the inevitable will be down on you. Who is the man in the distance?"

"How tiresome!" Claudia exclaimed. "It is Captain Fenwick, and we shall not be able to talk any more. Perhaps he has not seen us, and we can escape."

"Oh, he has seen us. Bring your philosophy to bear, for, after all, you find him more endurable than the others—him or his bicycle, which is it?" As Captain Fenwick came swiftly up, and swung himself off, she added, "That is one point I particularly dislike in the thing. It is always taking you unawares. There is no time to prepare, or to call up one's blandest

expression. However, here is Miss Hamilton who has just been singing its praises—yours, I mean."

"It's very good," said Claudia, eyeing it critically, "I wish I hadn't been in a hurry for mine."

"Yours is well enough. You can have one or two things altered. Look here——" he was beginning, when Miss Arbuthnot broke in.

"For pity's sake, spare me a digression on wheels and pistons, or whatever they may be. You can discuss them at your ease on your way to Huntingdon."

He glanced at Claudia. Miss Arbuthnot glanced too.

"So we can," said the girl cheerfully. "I expect you can put me up to all sorts of things."

"Dear me," murmured Miss Arbuthnot, "the world has changed indeed since my day!"

"Your day?"

"It must have been a hundred years ago, for it would have held up many hands in horror at a young man and a young woman arriving by themselves at a country house."

"Yes, it is improving," said Claudia, with scorn, "it doesn't think silly things as it did."

The day before this would have been very well, but to-day conscience gave a little tweak at her elbow, recalling her scene with Harry, and she became suddenly silent. Helen noticed the change, and Claudia saw that she noticed. Something made her turn quickly to Fenwick.

"I must go," she said. "If you're meaning to stay here, I wish you'd let me take your bicycle to the house. I want to look it over."

Miss Arbuthnot stood watching her from under the green boughs. Then she glanced at Fenwick. "She's not going to fall in love with you," she remarked.

"Aren't you a little — in advance of the situation?"

"Not in advance of your thoughts. What attracts you? But I know."

"You're bewildering," he observed rather savagely. "Not content with furnishing me with imaginary fancies, you provide an explanation of them."

She went on as if he had not spoken.

"She thinks no more of you than of a dozen others she has met in her small life."

"You're encouraging."

"Oh," said Helen sleepily, "do you want encouragement?"

He saw his slip, and looked more angry, but suddenly laughed.

"She's naïve enough to be amusing in these days. Enthusiastic, and all that, and believing so intolerably in her career. No woman has a right to a career——"

"Beyond that of losing her heart to Arthur Fenwick."

"—Until she's over thirty, at all events. It's got to be pointed out to her."

"And you are engaged in the object-lesson? One after your own mind, isn't it?"

She spoke in a bitter tone as they strolled along the soft turf. A startled young partridge fluttered across the ride in front of them. Fenwick seemed to have quite recovered his temper, for he laughed lightly.

"What makes you so awfully down on me to-day?"

"I suppose," she said, with a slight shrug of her shoulders, "that I was remembering."

"If you remember fairly——"

She interrupted him. "What woman does? Don't let us talk of what is over.

Forget, forget, forget—that is the real lesson of life, and one which you, at any rate, learn easily."

He had grown irritable again.

"It depends upon what you choose to call forgetting," he said sharply. "Forgetting is like everything else, each person looks at it from his own standpoint."

"And makes it a horrid nuisance for others. Come, wasn't that in your mind?" She laughed again.

"You credit—discredit—me with thoughts I don't own to," he retorted. "Why am I to be held responsible for the past? If we felt we had made a mistake, was it only I who found it out?"

"On the contrary, it was I."

"Then why blame me?"

"Because I am a woman, I suppose," she said, and a close listener might have detected that her voice trembled. "But I can assure you, I never really blame you. As you say, it was I, and—I was wise.'

"Oh, of course!" he said, with a touch of pique.

"Still," she persisted, "mistakes some-

times cost more than they are worth, and it is not safe to repeat them."

To this he made no answer.

"So that you might, at any rate, leave that child alone."

He shot out indignantly—"You always speak as if I were to blame!"

"Forgive me," she said. "Of course it is unjust." She suddenly added, "What nonsense we have talked! It is disappointing, when one really meant to be useful. I shall go back to the house and try some other way—perhaps copy out a recipe for beef-tea for Mrs. Hilton."

"Since when have you indulged in such high aspirations?" His tone was still moody.

"Oh, they awake, even in me, at times," she returned lightly. "Don't come with me."

He lifted his hat stiffly, and Helen stood with a smile and watched him out of sight. Then she sat down on a mound of grass, and cried as if her heart would break.

CHAPTER VII.

CLAUDIA was ungratefully anxious to leave Thornbury. She had been happy there, but the young expect to be happy, and the last days had made her uncomfortable. Harry said no word, and tried hard to be as he had been when hope still lived in his heart, but Claudia was annoyed when she saw him looking grave, or when his mother remarked she did not know what could be the matter with Harry.

"Perhaps he has toothache," said Ruth Baynes, lifting her eyebrows sympathetically. "My brother Walter gets dreadfully low when he has toothache. And it was much worse when he had mumps."

"Mumps! Oh, my dear, I hope poor Harry has not caught anything of that sort! They are in the village, and the gardener's

little girl certainly had a swollen face. Still—Harry has not complained, has he?"

"Not to me," said Claudia, with a laugh.

Perhaps in spite of the longing to keep her near him, Harry himself was not sorry when the last day came. The old kindly companionship, even if disdainful on her part, had been sweet, and now that, too, was gone. Claudia scolded him no more, laughed at him no more, and he felt as if she had stepped far away. He blamed himself for the change, but it took the heart out of him. And the gallant effort he made to prevent those who loved him from knowing that he suffered, seemed at times more than he could successfully keep up.

Still, when the last moment came, and they all stood at the door to see Claudia and Captain Fenwick ride away together out of his life, Harry went through the worst sensation he had ever experienced. He did his best to hide it, laughed at his mother's misgivings, assuring her that nowadays it was the most common proceeding in the world, and that he meant to take Helen Arbuthnot home in the same fashion; and, instead of retiring to solitude, went straight off to the

stable to doctor a lame horse. There were plenty of prosaic and unromantic details to be attended to, of which he shirked not one; the buying pigs, and deciding what should be done with an unprofitable cow, had to be talked over and arranged without impatience. After this he walked off to see the keeper's old mother, who was very irritable with constant pain, and dearly loved to grumble against all her family to Master Harry. And no one knew how big an ache he carried in his kindly heart.

But meanwhile?

Well, meanwhile it was summer-time, and under a blue sky veiled here and there with white clouds, through lanes in which honeysuckle still ran riot, Claudia and her companion raced swiftly along, or dawdled up the many hills. He was a little surprised at her vigorous enjoyment of all about them, and, so contagious is happiness, found himself, too, making merry over the veriest trifles. Wonder broke out at last.

"You have turned me into a boy again. What magic do you use?"

"It is not I," said Claudia merrily. "It is the air and the sky and the trees and the

great simple things which we think nothing about. Why must you be a boy to feel the enchantment of them all?"

"Do you advise me, then, to go and live in a hut?"

"Oh, I don't advise. There's a splendid butterfly."

She named it correctly.

"One of the girls at the college collected butterflies. I don't do it myself because I like them too much. Look! here is a splendid bit of road for a spin. Let us race to that gate, though I shan't have a chance."

She dashed off, and contrived so cleverly to prevent his passing, that only at the last minute could Fenwick succeed in slipping round her.

"Only just!" she cried, waving her hand. "Oh, that was glorious! I wish we had timed ourselves."

They raced again, teased each other, laughed, and behaved like two children on a holiday. As they went down the Huntingdon drive, Claudia gave a sigh of satisfaction.

"I've enjoyed it so much, every bit of it, haven't you?"

At another time he might have answered with some compliment, but the frank appeal confused him. He was unprepared for such simple delight, in which he could not but feel he had no more special share than twenty other things about them. Claudia had looked upon him as a playfellow—nothing else.

Nor could his vanity flatter him that she leaned upon him in this entry into a world of strangers. Quite unabashed, thoroughly direct, and changed and professional to her fingers' ends, Fenwick, with annoyance for which he could scarcely account, saw amusement growing in his cousin Lady Wilmot's dancing eyes. When they were left alone, it broke out.

"Oh, Arthur, Arthur, now I understand!"

"You understand nothing at all," he said roughly. There was an occasional roughness in his manner, which cynics said was what women liked. Lady Wilmot only smiled.

"Do tell her not to be quite so solemn about it all," she said. "She is so exceedingly determined we shan't for one moment forget what she is here for, that she is for ever flaunting her calling in one's face. But she's quite a nice little thing."

"Yes," he repeated in the same tone, "quite a nice little thing—whatever that may mean."

"Don't be rude. You might allow for my surprise, when I had made up my mind to a middle-aged being with spectacles and an umbrella, at being confronted with this young little person. I'm very glad—at least I shall be if you can persuade her to unbend, and if Peter doesn't make love to her."

"As if Peter had ever eyes for any one but yourself!"

But if Lady Wilmot was astonished, Fenwick himself had odd sensations. Beginning his acquaintance with the girl with a certain amount of pique at an indifference to which he was unaccustomed, and a determination to drag her out of it, he had taken a great deal more trouble than was usual with him, and yet had failed. He knew women well enough to own that he had failed utterly, and as his vanity could never endure defeat, the consciousness made him more keen to carry out his purpose. Then came this summer afternoon in which he had seen Claudia in a new light, when something of harmony in the girl's nature with

the fresh cool simplicity of a country world, touched him as nothing had touched him for years, and carried him back to his boyish days. For the first time he felt a sharp stab of annoyance when he found that she was up again on her heroic hobby-horse, and that Lady Wilmot's eyes were brimming over with amusement.

"Good heavens!" he said to himself savagely, "I must speak to her, prevent her from making such a fool of herself. When she's out of this preposterous nonsense she's charming, but where are her eyes, where's her sense of the ridiculous?"

Nor did he ask himself why Claudia's folly should disturb him.

He stopped her the next morning in a corridor which served for a picture-gallery. She had on a white dress, and, with her hands clasped behind her, was standing looking at the portrait of a young girl.

"Who is it by?" she asked. "I don't know about pictures, but this strikes me as very good."

"Romney, I believe," he said; and then abruptly, "Look here, you and I are old friends."

"Old friends!" Claudia repeated, opening her eyes.

"Older than anybody here, at any rate. And I suppose you'll own that I've knocked about the world more than you? What on earth makes you cram all these people about your business here?"

"I think you are rather rude," she said, flushing. "If you were in my position, you would understand."

"Your position! We're most of us in some sort of position, but we don't go talking about it all day long. It's just as if you were ashamed of it."

"Now I am sure you are rude," Claudia cried, still redder. "Ashamed, indeed! But I don't choose to appear as if I were merely a guest. That is not fair upon my employers. I am a professional, a working woman; I am not going to be paid for just driving about and amusing myself like other girls, and unless I make it quite clear, they will insist upon thinking that is what I expect."

"Of course," he said, still roughly, "I know well enough what you have in your head, but you needn't be always cramming

it down people's throats. State the fact, if you insist upon it, and then leave it alone."

Claudia felt this to be very disagreeable indeed. She said slowly—

"Have you done?"

"Naturally you're offended," he went on, with a sudden softening of his voice. "But if you think it fairly over, I believe I may get you to own that it can't have been very pleasant for me to speak?"

Her face cleared, and she looked frankly at him.

"I suppose it was not," she allowed. "Did you do it on my account, or because you disliked any one you had to do with being laughed at?" But before he had recovered from this rebuke, she added with a certain sweetness which was noticeable in her at times, "Still, you must not think that I am angry. I suppose I was for a moment, but it was foolish of me, because you were right, quite right, to say out what was in your mind. And I dare say, too, that you are right in what you think. I suppose it seems so much more important to me than to them all—not on my own account, but because we

feel we are making a beginning—that I have let myself talk too much about it."

"So that you forgive me?" he said, quite humbly for him.

She laughed.

"I forgive you. I dare say that by-and-by I shall have reached the height of being even grateful. But now you must let me go, because if I am not to talk I must work all the harder."

"You can always talk to me," he said eagerly.

"Oh no," she said, escaping, with a shake of her head. "I must break myself of a bad habit."

If Claudia had been mortified by his plain speaking, there was no doubt that she took the lesson to heart. There was no more of that somewhat masterful enthusiasm with which she had up to this time indulged her hearers. She became, instead, extremely reticent, and not an allusion to the college or to professional duties passed her lips. Fenwick was half pleased, half vexed, because this was not the Claudia he knew. He found himself thinking of her with persistence which amazed him. He could not flatter

himself that she was angry with him, but would have welcomed her anger as proof that in some way or another he affected her. Why did he not? He raged at the thought of caring that he should, but he could not deny her indifference.

The days went by; Claudia still kept her word. She went quietly about the work she had in hand, but would not talk of it—even to Fenwick. This annoyed him, and one evening he threw himself into a chair by her side, and told her so.

"Women always go into extremes," he grumbled, when he had made his complaint.

Claudia looked at him and laughed.

"I never knew any one so difficult to please," she said. "I thought I was carrying out my lessons."

"So you are," he replied impatiently, "but you needn't practise your lessons upon everybody. I ought to be an exception."

"Why?"

"Because I am not a stranger like these other people."

"Oh," said Claudia, laughing still more unfeelingly; "I never knew any one make

quite so much out of a fortnight before! Wasn't it a fortnight that you had known me?"

"I believe I have known you always," he returned hardily. "Days—weeks—what have they to do with the matter?"

"Is that a compliment?"

"Uncompromising truth. Don't you see that it gives me the power of understanding you?"

This is an appeal which rarely fails with women, and Fenwick knew how to accentuate it by fixing his dark eyes upon the girl, and flinging an intensity of will into his gaze. She merely lifted her eyebrows.

"I dare say. I don't think any one ever found me mysterious."

He was angrily aware that she spoke truly. There were few complexities in her character to baffle any one, but there was for him a baffling directness and simplicity against which his efforts beat themselves in vain. She met them with an indifference which perpetually incited him to break it down.

Lady Wilmot was a little disappointed that Claudia did not carry out the promise

of her first hours, for she was a small lady who liked nothing so well as amusement, and had foreseen a rich supply. With the other two or three who were staying there the girl was popular in her own way, which, however, kept her apart except at meals and in the evening. In truth, although she had taken Fenwick's hint both lightly and good-humouredly, it gave her the sort of shock one gets by running full tilt against a wall. She had been anxious to impress those about her with the gravity of woman's work, to see that they put it on a level with man's, to shake off the faintest accusation of frivolity; and, to accomplish this end she was prepared to be pointed at and scorned. With such lofty aspirations nothing could be well more humiliating than to find herself considered a bore. Here lay the point of Fenwick's moral, it was from this he wanted to save her. "A bore, a bore, a bore!" She scourged herself with the taunt, and vowed there should be no more of it, for to the young, ridicule is intolerable.

But the resolution made her feel curiously lonely. The girls at the college, mostly reformers, all enthusiasts, largely impressed

with the part they had to play, and occasionally in more open revolt, incited and encouraged each other over their work, which seemed to them of supreme importance. When Claudia came out of this atmosphere it still clung about her, so that she babbled of it gravely, as she had babbled to her companions. Now she was sure she had been a bore, and the thought stung. It made her, also, silent and reserved, although this was so unlike her nature that she only got at it by sheer force of will. Fenwick had certainly offered himself as sympathetic, but she was shrewd enough to reflect, "What he warned me against, he feels himself. He is ready to talk because I am a girl and not bad-looking, but only on that account, not because he really cares." And then thought flew to Harry Hilton, not with the wish that she had given him a different answer, but with absolute certainty that he would never have considered her a bore.

CHAPTER VIII.

HUNTINGDON HALL was a comfortable house, with rooms which Lady Wilmot had already transformed. The grounds, however, were not to compare with those of Thornbury, for they had passed through a long season of neglect, and the trees were tall and lank, requiring both thinning and autumn planting. Claudia's labours would not bear fruit for years. She said this to Sir Peter one day when she had sent to ask him to come and decide for himself whether a certain important change should be carried out. She liked Sir Peter. He was a big clumsy man, rather shy, with twinkling eyes which, when he smiled, screwed themselves into innumerable wrinkles, and a slight hesitation—not amounting to a stammer—in his speech. He invariably gave his decisions clearly.

"We are very much obliged to you, Miss Hamilton," he said finally; "but my wife told me to tell you that you must take an off-day now and then, and she wants you to go to Barton Towers to-day." As Claudia hesitated he went on, "I warn you she will accept no denial, and really it is a place which you ought to see."

A week ago she would have taken refuge behind her occupation, and afterwards she wished she had done so, at whatever cost; but her new dread of making it and herself ridiculous stopped the words which rose to her lips, and she was just agreeing when Lady Wilmot with her two pugs rustled round the corner.

"Ah! here you are, Peter," she called out. "I wish you wouldn't let that boy, Charlie Carter, have your gun. Do go and take it away from him before he kills anybody." He went obediently, and she turned smilingly to Claudia. "Miss Hamilton, has Peter told you? I am not going to have any more unsociable excuses."

"I should like to come, please," said Claudia at once.

"I knew I should get you!" Lady

Wilmot exclaimed triumphantly. "Come with me to the hothouses, and let the men go to their dinner. Do you mind going to Barton on your bicycle? I'd give anything to ride mine, but Peter says I can't because of old Lady Bodmin. It's such a nuisance having to sit up in the victoria with her." And then Lady Wilmot, who was noted for making imprudent speeches, made a very imprudent one indeed. "I'm so glad you will come. We see nothing of you, and I am tired of trying to console Arthur Fenwick."

"Captain Fenwick? I don't understand," said Claudia coldly.

Lady Wilmot laughed. "Don't you?" she said gaily. "Well, I can't help being amused, because generally it's the other way, and now any one can see that he's devoted, and you treat the poor fellow quite cruelly."

"Oh, you are very much mistaken!" cried the girl, frowning. "You ought not—I beg your pardon, but really people ought not to imagine such foolish things. Captain Fenwick is absolutely nothing to me, nor I to him."

"Now you are certainly blind. And do you mean to say you haven't thought of him—seriously, I mean?"

"I? Never!" returned Claudia proudly. "Nor he of me."

"Oh, there you are wrong," said Lady Wilmot, with amusement. She was going on, when Claudia interrupted her with a ring of indignation in her tone which took the other woman by surprise.

"Please don't say any more; I hate it! I should hate it if it were true, and it isn't. I can't tell you how much I dislike such things being said!"

She stopped. Lady Wilmot looked at her with interest. All emotion is impressive, and Claudia was very much moved in quite an unexpected way. She stood facing her hostess, her girlish features stirred and changed by an expression which had never before touched them.

"I beg your pardon," said Lady Wilmot quickly. "I spoke carelessly, as one does sometimes—much too often, if I'm to believe Peter. Don't think of it again. It was only nonsense."

"Yes," said Claudia, drawing a deep breath, "it was nonsense. Of course I shan't think of it again."

Lady Wilmot hurried after her husband, and caught him in the library.

"Peter, Peter," she said in an injured tone, "I thought new women didn't mind what was said to them, and I thought Miss Hamilton was a new woman, and I said the least little bit in the world to her about Arthur, and found myself in quite the wrong box. She fired up, and told me to hold my tongue, or as good as told me. Imagine a girl who is so exceedingly independent, and bent upon taking care of herself, minding a little chaff! I supposed she would mind nothing."

"Did Arthur ask you to say anything?"

"Don't be annoying. It was a small voyage of discovery on my own account, because I really think he likes her—seriously, I mean, and I wanted to find out." She went on impressively, "I don't think she cares herself one little bit."

"Then there's an end of it."

"How tiresome you are, Peter!" she said petulantly. "I'll never believe she can stand up against him if he takes the trouble to make love to her. Anyway, I think it very hard she should fly out at me when my intentions were so good."

"Well, I hope your good intentions won't do any harm."

"How can they? She'd never thought of him. You're rather priggish this morning, Peter, but I may as well tell you that I mean some of them to go on their bicycles —Arthur, and Charlie Carter at all events. I shall give her the chance. If she likes it better, she can drive."

The same question was in Claudia's mind. She felt hunted, disdainful, indignant, all at once. First Harry and then Captain Fenwick thrust down her unwilling throat. It was persecution! She, who would have none of them, who was thinking of much more important business, who had meant to live her own life, and, so far as in her lay, to be mistress of her fate, bitterly resented an interruption which seemed to place her at once on a level with all the other pleasure-loving idle girls of the day, whose heads were full of offers and settlements. She! Claudia raised her chin, and looked like an angry nymph. If Fenwick had passed that way he would have met with scant civility. She thought Lady Wilmot impertinent, she wished she had not come to the place, and then suddenly, to her added annoyance, found her eyes

brimming with hot tears, which put the final touch to her humiliation. She dashed them away with scornful fierceness. "So"—she rated herself—"so it has come to this, that if a stupid thing happens, you cry about it! Oh, do pluck up a little spirit and resolve not to think twice about such folly! Most likely it is all her invention, or else he has just been amusing himself in the way men do, and pretending—pretending!—to her that he cares. You should expect to meet such men, Claudia. And what ought you to do? Certainly not trouble yourself about them. Turn yourself into a stone wall. I suppose you have sense enough left to go on just as usual? But I wish, I do wish she hadn't said it! It makes everything disagreeable and stupid. It shan't, though! What's the use of having a will of one's own if one can't use it? If he wants to speak, let him, and there's an end of it; and if he has the better sense to hold his tongue, I shall know she was wrong. And if, as I suppose, we are to go on our bicycles to this tiresome place to-day, I'm not going to blush prettily and draw back; I shall do exactly as I should have done if she hadn't

come out and spoilt my morning. The most annoying part of it all is that I have quite forgotten what I meant to do with those hollies. I know that I had some capital notion, and it has gone. Oh, *how* tiresome men are!"

Claudia sat wrathfully down, pulled out her pocket-book, rested her chin on her hands, and forced her mind to stern consideration of her plans. In some degree this brought back her calm, so that when she appeared at luncheon, and ways and means for reaching Barton Towers were discussed, she did not allow a shadow of hesitation to appear in her manner. Lady Bodmin clung to the victoria, and Lady Wilmot made a little face of dismay. Claudia said calmly that of course she could bicycle, and inwardly hoped that Captain Fenwick would not be of the party. But this was far from his intention.

"I thought you hated calls?" said Lady Wilmot mischievously.

"One has to suffer sometimes."

Lady Wilmot laid down her fork.

"You might stay at home."

"I should never hear the last of it."

"Well, then," she said, looking meditatively at Claudia, "you three are provided for."

"Three?" said Fenwick quickly.

"Yes, Charlie — Charlie Carter. You always try to forget him."

"He ought to be forgotten. He's not in the least wanted. Good heavens! a boy who plays practical jokes!"

"That is why I want you to look after him," said Lady Wilmot in a firm voice. "Besides, he must go. Lady Bodmin agrees with me."

Fenwick flung an aggrieved glance at Claudia, but she was gazing out of the window. In her heart she was saying joyfully—

"He may play practical jokes as much as he likes, and I shall take care he is not forgotten. If worse comes to worst I'll fetch him myself."

But this sense of relief was so derogatory to the standard of the professional young woman which she had set up, that she was torn by different feelings, extremely pleased when Charlie Carter arrived, dripping, from a practical investigation of the Black Pond, yet so ashamed of clinging to such a fossilized

an institution as a chaperon, that she took herself to task for not agreeing to Captain Fenwick's strongly expressed desire to start and leave the boy to follow. When she refused he hinted at a change in herself.

"When we came here, you didn't mind trusting yourself to me."

"Mind!" she exclaimed indignantly. "Do you suppose I mind, when if you weren't going I should go by myself?"

He bit his lip, but pressed his point.

"Then come along," he said, "and leave that wretched boy to follow. He has to get food and dry clothes, and will be an hour at least."

"There's no hurry," said Claudia coolly. "If you want to overtake the others—go. We'll come after."

"You are cruel," he said in a low voice.

To this she made no reply, determined to ignore such speeches, but she could not help perceiving that her insistence annoyed him very much, or that he had scarcely recovered himself when they set off. The day was full of the rich strong beauty of late summer, freshened by recent rain which had washed the dusty hedges green again; the clouds

were no longer grey and uniform, but broken into great precipitous masses, dazzlingly white in part, and here and there fading softly into blue. Their way at first ran along a road high on a hill, and commanding exquisite views of the country round. But Claudia, in spite of self-scolding, could not call back the fresh and delightful enjoyment of that other day when they had come to Huntingdon. She was on the watch, at times on the defensive, despising herself that it should be so, but heartily wishing that the ride was over. Nor could she utilize Charlie Carter as much as she would have liked, for he was one of a large family, with a profound contempt for all girls except his own sisters, and a yet more profound admiration for Captain Fenwick. He was therefore gruff, and disregardful of Claudia, sidling out of her way, and ready to please his hero by acting as scout and rushing along side lanes in search of short cuts. At such times Claudia made desperate attempts to push on, but there is a limit to this means of escape even on a bicycle, and when hills came, she was obliged to walk up them. Perhaps Fenwick noted the disturbance, and perhaps he preferred it

to her former indifference, for now and then a smile crossed his face which it would have enraged her to see. He asked her suddenly whether she liked Huntingdon better than Thornbury. This was safe ground, and she breathed freely.

"I have a bigger opening there," she said. "Thornbury was already beautiful, and Huntingdon has to be made so. It's very interesting."

"You have said so little about it lately that I had fears."

"Women go into extremes, you know," returned Claudia, dimpling, and quoting his own words.

"Yes, but you are not like other women. You have independence and originality." As Claudia struggled breathlessly against the hill, he added in a vexed tone, "Why on earth must you be in such a hurry?"

"You were in a hurry yourself just now."

But she was obliged to get off, and all she could do was to walk with the bicycle between them.

"That was to start, not to arrive. Did you really suppose I cared to find myself at Barton Towers?"

"I don't know. I know I do. I expect to pick up a great many hints, after what Sir Peter said about the place."

"All in good time," he said crossly. "What I want to say, if you will only give me the chance to speak—— Good gracious! what is it now?"

"Isn't there something wrong with the wheel?"

"Nothing at all. What do you suppose I'm going to say, that you won't listen?"

Claudia called all her dignity to her aid, and turned an offended face upon him.

"Pray go on. I am quite ready to listen."

"Well, it's only this. I think it hard that you should shut me out of your hopes and ambitions so determinedly as you have been doing lately. I had flattered myself that you, above all women, were fair enough not to visit on an unfortunate man's head his awkward carrying out of a good intention."

"Oh," she cried rashly, "did you suppose——"

And then she yet more rashly stopped, for it was a hundred times worse to let him guess at the real reason for her coldness.

"If not?" he said, perceiving his advantage, and pushing it.

Claudia took refuge in petulancy.

"Why on earth must one explain why one does this, or doesn't do that? What do you complain of? That I haven't talked over my ideas with you? Very well, I will talk now. I suppose you have happened to notice a big group of firs, the only fine thing about the place?" And she flourished the note-book Miss Arbuthnot found so obnoxious. "There! As no one can see them unless they go to look, I suggest making a clean sweep of those worthless trees in front, then——"

He put up his hand.

"Spare me; I don't want detail."

"Very well," said Claudia triumphantly. "Then you mustn't complain."

"You have run off the track. All that has nothing to do with my complaint. I am anxious, very anxious, to be told what—if you were really not offended at my plain speaking—has altered you towards me." His voice changed, there crept into it a thrill which made Claudia miserably conscious of what might be at hand. She

frowned and stared straight before her. "You don't know," he was saying, "how I have looked forward to a chance like this, when I might have you to myself, and now I can hardly get a glance. And yet you are not offended? Then why are you so different from what you were ten days ago?"

"How can one always be exactly the same?" she asked coldly. "Besides, you are exaggerating; I don't feel any change."

"Oh yes, you do. Something has brought it about. Some confounded tongues have been tattling."

"Tattling!" repeated Claudia, frowning harder.

"Yes, old cats like Lady Bodmin, who can't see a man and woman talking——"

"I know! Isn't it idiotic?" said the girl frankly, turning a relieved face upon him.

If she had not looked, perhaps he would not have spoken. In spite of his manœuvring for a quiet and uninterrupted time with Claudia, he had no intention of saying anything serious—at least so soon. But, like many another man, he lost his balance when he least expected it, and, curiously enough,

as with Harry Hilton, it was her name which broke from his lips.

"Claudia!"

To her unutterable relief, Charlie Carter shot out of a lane, not ten feet ahead of them.

"I say, that way's no good," he shouted. "I've been ever so far. You've got to go down this hill, and you'd better look out, for there's a nasty sharp turn at the bottom."

Claudia neither heard him nor would she have heeded. Anything at such a moment would have seemed better to her than being forced to listen to the words she felt were imminent. She got quickly on her bicycle, and called out joyfully—

"Oh, I am so tired of pushing! Who will race me down the hill?"

"Stop!" cried Fenwick peremptorily.

But nothing would have stopped her then. Escape, escape from what she most dreaded to hear lay before her. She was confident in her own powers, and, with a gay wave of the hand, down the steep rough road she went flying at a speed which she found dangerously intoxicating. Charlie Carter, giving an answering whoop of wild delight,

rushed after, and Fenwick, inwardly anathematizing the folly of his companions, spun past the boy, and closely followed Claudia's track, shouting to her to be careful, and each moment expecting to see her overturned by some of the many stones or ruts. In spite, however, of her excitement, she guided herself cleverly, and only called laughingly back without checking her pace. All might have gone well had it not been for the sharp turn at the foot of the hill. What made this perilous, and what neither Fenwick nor Claudia knew, was that another lane emerged at the same point. The old high-road which the three had taken was but little used for carriages, or such a danger would never have been tolerated. Fenwick realized it before the others, owing to his catching sight over the hedge of the top of a carter's hat. But the cart was jogging down its own hill into the road, and though he pressed his bell, and shouted at the top of his voice, the man did not hear, nor, indeed, so close was Claudia, did it seem possible to avert a collision. By a really prodigious effort, Fenwick shot in between them, pushing her bicycle so violently that

it fell on one side, although clear of the cart. He himself was not so fortunate, for the near horse knocked him over, and before the startled driver could pull up, one of the heavy wheels had gone over him.

CHAPTER IX.

FOR the first minutes Claudia could realize nothing but confusion, and a dreadful sense of terror; for the shock to herself had been so great as to set her head whirling, and prevent her instant understanding of what had happened. She slowly gathered herself up, while the driver, who was not quite sober, jumped off, swore loudly, and ran to his horses' heads. In his excitement he would have jerked them back, so that the wheel would again have passed over Fenwick, if Charlie Carter had not caught his arm.

"Stop, you fool!" he said. "Can't you see what you're doing?"

The driver swore another great oath, and rubbed his arm across his wet forehead.

"'Tworn't no fault o' mine," he protested. "Why didn't you look ahead?"

"Shut up!" said Charlie tersely, "and hold these brutes of yours quiet while I get him out."

Claudia, white as a ghost, came to his side.

"I can help," she said.

"Can you?" said the boy, looking distrustfully at her. "You won't faint, or anything?"

"No."

"It's all got awfully mixed up, you see. However, here goes! we can't leave him there. I say, I'll hand all I can out to you first before we move him."

He was under the cart as he spoke, disentangling the wheels very handily, for the smash had been so complete that they were knotted and twisted in an extraordinary manner. Flies were making the horses fidgety, and a great cart-wheel was very close. At last, as part of the machinery was drawn from under Fenwick, there came a groan.

"Oh, take care!" cried Claudia.

"All right!" said the boy, more cheerily, for all this time he had been working with a deadly fear in his heart. "I think it must be his leg that's hurt." He emerged

the next moment, and stood looking from Claudia to Fenwick, and back again.

"Well?" she said, drawing a long breath.

He nodded in the direction of the driver, who stood stupidly staring.

"That ass of a fellow could lift him if he had the sense, but if any bones are broken he might make bad worse. I say, do you think you're strong enough to pull, or could you get under and keep his leg quiet while I draw him out?"

"Give me the man's whip. I know how to make a splint."

She was under the cart the next moment, and between them they managed the business by tearing their handkerchiefs into strips. The next thing was to draw him out as smoothly and easily as they could, but it seemed endless, Fenwick groaning heavily, and when the operation was over, Claudia, who prided herself upon her nerve, was disgusted to find herself shaking in every limb. The cart lumbered off, the man, who was really not to blame, but who was sufficiently muddled to be doubtful on the point, glad to escape, and Claudia and Charlie were left staring at each other.

"You can stop here with him, can't you?" said the boy. "I must go and fetch a doctor or a carriage or something. That fellow would have been all day about it."

"Of course I can stop. You'd better go to the Hall, and send a man for the doctor. Make them be quick."

He flung a doubtful look at her, but there was no help for it, and great need for haste. He got on his bicycle and rode away, and Claudia was left with the unconscious Fenwick, and her own reflections.

They were sufficiently miserable. Her foolhardiness, or, at any rate, her attempt to escape from an embarrassing situation, had undoubtedly caused the accident, while, to make matters worse, she, who ought to have been the sufferer, had been saved by Fenwick, perhaps at the expense of his own life or limb, for she could not but see that he was seriously hurt. To Claudia, apt to pride herself upon her independence, and power of going her own way, this alone would have been humiliating enough; add to it that the man loved her, for the ring of the one word "Claudia!" which was still in her ears, told her so much beyond a doubt.

And here she was, helpless. Before Charlie Carter had been gone ten minutes, she had jumped up and run a little way along the road, feeling as if hours had passed, and help must be near. Then, blaming herself for leaving Fenwick, who might revive to find himself alone, she hurried back to his side, and tried to smooth the jacket which they had folded under his head, wishing meanwhile that she could have gone for help herself, for she was certain she would have been quicker.

As it happened, matters had turned out extraordinarily well, for Charlie, on his way to the Hall, met a young surgeon well known to the Wilmots, who at once drove on to the scene of the accident, while the boy fetched a carriage ; so that Claudia had not the length of time to wait that she imagined for herself. Moreover, the young man arrived having been told all particulars, and requiring no such explanations from her as she might have found it difficult to give. Indeed, when he glanced at her he saw that she was in no condition to be asked questions, and applied himself to the patient, who was beginning to recover

consciousness. But when he got up he looked serious.

"Is he very much hurt?" asked Claudia, trembling.

"I hope not. I can hardly tell as yet," he answered evasively. "His leg is broken, and you have done all that was possible. Now will you allow me to offer you a little advice? You have also had a fall, I understand?"

"Oh, not to hurt." She pulled her hair impatiently over a bruise on her temple.

"You can do no more good here"—Claudia was grateful for the "more"—"and the carriage will very soon arrive from the Hall. If you wouldn't object to my man driving you and your bicycle back, you can see that all is ready for us there."

"Must I go?" said poor Claudia piteously. But she added at once, "Yes, yes, I see."

The suggestion of overlooking the old housekeeper's preparations was a pious fraud, for there was nothing to be done except to answer a hundred questions, and to drink a certain decoction on which Mrs. Graham prided herself, and which in more self-contained moments she would certainly have

rejected. This gone through, walking up and down her own room, where she had been banished, she could no longer defend herself against a returning rush of remorse.

"Why, why was I such a fool! As if I could not have let him speak and have done with it, instead of plunging off in that idiotic fashion! And then, if only he had left me alone! I should not in the least have minded a broken leg myself, or even worse." She dropped her hands, and stood at the window looking gravely out, for Claudia was at the age when living has not become so strong a habit, and death is not so much shrunk from. "But to see him lying there, and to know that it was all one's own fault—I don't think there could be a more horrid situation. And then it was very plucky, the most plucky thing he could have done, and just when I had been so nasty to him! Oh, Claudia, Claudia, a fine muddle you have made of it! As if you couldn't have kept your head, told him quietly you didn't care for him, and not behaved so altogether idiotically, and landed yourself in such a hateful position! I wish" —she paused—"yes, I do wish that Anne

was here, for there isn't a soul to whom to turn. Even Harry Hilton. If Harry had done it—he wouldn't have been quick enough, but if he had, it wouldn't have mattered half so much, because he would have taken it as a matter of course, and never thought about it afterwards. But now"—another pause—"I wonder if he does like me very much? Miss Arbuthnot saw, I suppose, when I didn't, and she implied that he was spoilt—I don't know, I think she might be jealous, and he must have cared a good deal to dash in like that. Oh, why, why was I such a fool as to put myself under such an obligation to any man! Perhaps it's not so bad, perhaps—— Oh, there are the wheels. Now I shall know something, and anything, anything must be better than this dreadful uncertainty!"

But the uncertainty continued. The leg was set, the patient had recovered consciousness, and had immediately asked for Claudia. But the doctor was still in the house, and had sent for a nurse. More, Claudia could not make out. She had come down, looking very white, and was giving Charlie Carter tea, and a great deal of tea-cake, after which

he proposed, as he expressed it, to joggle over towards Barton Towers, expecting to meet and explain matters to Lady Wilmot. He had become more confidential towards Claudia, but also more contemptuous.

"I say, how could you be such a duffer?" he demanded. "Didn't you hear me call out to you to look out for that turn?"

"No, I didn't," she said meekly. "I wasn't attending."

"Then you ought to attend, or you'll always be coming to grief. There's where Carry gets a pull over you."

"Who's Carry?"

"She's my sister, don't you know? The eldest of the lot. You and she go along much of a muchness, only she doesn't lose her head."

"Oh!" murmured Claudia, too conscious that she deserved the reproach to defend herself.

"I never saw any one get such a cropper before," he went on, "and it's an awful pity about that wheel of his. It's utterly and entirely done for."

She plucked up spirit.

"I wish to goodness he had left me alone!"

"He couldn't, of course, because you're a girl. I'm not sure that girls ought to ride at all," said Charlie, helping himself to more tea-cake. "Otherwise, I bet he'd have got out of the way fast enough. I never knew any one cut in as sharply as he did. I couldn't have done it myself."

"You! Of course you couldn't, a boy like you!" She was stung to retort. "I wish you'd finish your tea and go. They'll all be wondering what has become of us."

"I'll go. But I never saw such a beastly tea as old Fuller has brought in," he remarked, mournfully regarding the empty dish.

"Charlie!"

"Well?"

"You go and ask Mrs. Graham how Captain Fenwick is going on, and I'll order in a second tea-cake."

"You won't dare."

"Won't I?"

"Oh, I shan't go up again."

"You must. You must take the last, the very last news to Barton Towers. Sometimes five minutes makes a difference."

"What rot! However, all right. I'll

ring for old Fuller, if you're sure you can tackle him."

Claudia was glad to get rid of the boy who seemed so certain that she and she only was to blame, that he served to accentuate her own self-reproach. Still, for the first time in her life, solitude was insupportable, and her thoughts turned longingly again and again to the kindly cousins at Elmslie. Should she telegraph and go back to them the next day, throwing up her work? The idea came weighted with longing, but she rejected it as cowardly; for in spite of the pain and perplexity of her position, she hated to give up what she had begun, conscience telling her that it was unfair to her employers. She flushed and paled too, as she reflected that it would be heartless to leave Huntingdon while Captain Fenwick lay there in a condition for which she might be held responsible, considering that it had been brought about by her own folly. Hateful reflection, which yet served to keep her mind fixed upon the sufferer. Never in her life had she passed such miserable hours. Never had her career seemed so unsatisfying.

Nor was it much better when the others appeared. True it was that no one blurted out Charlie's exceedingly downright reproaches, but she had an immediate conviction that he had related the story in such a manner that all the blame rested upon her, while she was so handicapped that it was impossible to excuse herself by explaining the circumstances of the case. She held her head high and looked defiant when, after largely commiserating Captain Fenwick, Lady Bodmin, who had always considered Claudia unduly forward, remarked that she had been given to understand that only the most skilful of cyclists should venture into such stony roads. Claudia, who felt herself skilful, could not say so; but Lady Wilmot dashed to her rescue.

"It was all the fault of that corner. It is most dreadfully dangerous, and I am always telling Peter that he must make a fuss about it. Think of Marjory"—Marjory was the baby—"killing herself there some day!"

"Happily Miss Hamilton has not killed herself," said Lady Bodmin sweetly, with a long drag on the last word.

Claudia was accustomed to pride herself

upon indifference to these pin-pricks, for they had been exercised upon her before. To-day, however, they were stabs, deadly stabs; she shivered as they came, and imagined them even when they did not exist. Her head ached from its severe bruise, and she had sprained her wrist, but not a word of complaint would she utter. Nor could she fail to see that, although both Lady Wilmot, and Sir Peter when he came back, were as kind and comforting as possible, and tried to make light of the disaster, they were uneasily anxious. Some words which she caught made her think that they were discussing sending for Mrs. Leslie, Fenwick's married sister, and although Lady Wilmot evidently opposed the project, whatever it was, Claudia's heart stood still at what it might not portend. The evening passed in a strange disjointed fashion. Generally they all played billiards, to-night only Sir Peter and Charlie went off. Once Claudia stepped out on the terrace, thankful to find herself alone, with the great night about her. The sweep of the park lying in broad outline under a full moon, took a mysterious beauty which was wanting by day, and was inexpressibly soothing. She

stood still for a little while and drank it in, then her eye fell upon a corner of the house from which through the open window a light darted out. As she looked, a dark shadow crossed it, and she remembered that it was the window of Fenwick's room. All her unrest returned. She walked down until she was underneath it, and stopped, vividly picturing the suffering which he was enduring, and she had caused. As she stood, another window was thrown open, and she heard voices. Evidently the doctor and some one else, the nurse or Lady Wilmot, had gone into the adjoining room, and in the still night the doctor's low words fell distinctly on her ears.

"I must not conceal from you," he said, "that his condition is very grave."

CHAPTER X.

A WRITER has said, and with truth, that while a woman expects her friends to belong, as it were, to her whole life, and to adapt themselves to its many sides, a man, instead of desiring such universal sympathy, keeps his friends each on his own ground, and would be disgusted if either attempted to poach on the other. He may have thus a club friend, and a sporting friend, an antipodean and a corresponding friend, and such and such only they remain, while the sporting friend has never written him a letter in his life, and the antipodean would scarcely find a word to say if they met in Pall Mall. And this differing view of friendship makes difficulties between man and woman.

Harry Hilton and Arthur Fenwick had been school friends, and there had remained,

for as men they had little in common, and professed to find as little. Still the tie, such as it was, would last always, and Harry was a good deal shocked to hear of the accident, quite irrespectively of its bearing upon Claudia. He went over to Huntingdon Hall the next day, and Claudia, who forced herself to do her work, but broke off at intervals to hear the last report, met him near the house. She was so glad to see him that she forgot the past, and greeted him with her old ease. But he was shocked at her appearance.

"Oh, that's nothing!" she said, trying to speak lightly. "We are all having a bad time, and as I was the wretched cause, of course, in some ways, mine is the worst. What have you heard?"

"Only the fact that Fenwick was thrown under a cart. Why should you take the blame?"

"Because it was my folly. I would race down a hill, the cart cut across at the bottom, and I should have been under it if he had not pushed me on one side. He couldn't get out of the way himself." She shuddered.

"Oh, well," said Harry, instinctively trying to comfort her, "it was an accident which might have happened to any one. I'm only thankful he did push you."

"I'm not," she said, frowning with the pain of remembrance.

They walked on in silence. "How is he?" said Harry suddenly.

Claudia's hands knotted themselves.

"Very ill."

"His leg is broken, isn't it?"

"Yes, but not badly. They fear other injuries. A second doctor comes to-night, and Mrs. Leslie—his sister."

Harry's hopefulness asserted itself against her dreary tone.

"It mayn't be as bad as they think. I know Fenwick better than they, and he's a tough fellow. He'll come round, you'll see!"

A smile dawned on her face. "Do you really think so, or are you only—saying it?"

"Honour bright, I think so. You see, as I said, I know him, and they don't." He added with more effort, "Don't worry so much over it."

She turned frankly towards him, and drew a deep breath.

"Perhaps you're right. At any rate, I'm very glad you came, for there was no one I could speak to, freely. Sir Peter is in his study, and Lady Wilmot makes too light of it, and as for Lady Bodmin, she's hateful."

"Yes, then I'm very glad I came," said Harry manfully.

He was not clever, but he had that gift of helpfulness which makes the man or woman who possesses it a tower of strength to their friends. Everything looked brighter to Claudia, and she cast no reflection at what it cost him to walk by her side and feel convinced that all her thoughts were centred upon Fenwick. He owned with a sigh that it could hardly have been otherwise.

Lady Wilmot insisted upon his remaining to luncheon, and Sir Peter welcomed him warmly. A more hopeful spirit seemed to have sprung up with his advent, yet the accounts of Fenwick remained alarming enough.

"We've sent for Gertrude Leslie. Peter would have it, but it's a great bore," said Lady Wilmot, making a face. "She has all poor Arthur's faults and none of his

charm. However——! She hates nursing, so perhaps she won't stay."

"Oh, she won't stay when she sees he's better," Harry agreed.

"If he does get better," remarked Lady Bodmin, looking pointedly at Claudia.

"Of course he will," said Harry, with decision. "What I expect is that he's having a touch of the fever he picked up in India, and that your doctor doesn't know about it, and is puzzled. How are your improvements getting on here, Miss Hamilton?" he went on cheerily. "My mother insists upon every one going to look at that view of the Marldon hills which you opened out for us, and my father is awfully pleased, because he says his father used to talk about seeing them when he was a boy, and he'd forgotten."

She flung him a grateful look.

"We're going to rival you, but not just yet," said Sir Peter. "We've got to take it on trust for some time. What I admire in Miss Hamilton is the determination she shows."

Claudia was wishing that she had stuck to her work, and taken no holiday, but she

owned with relief that Harry had made things brighter, and flung a ray of hope upon the situation. She liked him extremely, and flattered herself that he had forgotten that stupid slip of his which had vexed her so much, and obliged her to speak severely. But the past weeks had sufficiently shaken her sense of security to make her glad that when Sir Peter suggested a walk to the Black Pond, that Harry might see what she proposed doing, he came himself, and brought Charlie Carter.

It was the spot she liked best at Huntingdon. The fine firs which, flinging their sullen shadows on the water, had given it its name, now stood out, bold and black, and free from cramping surroundings. Claudia had cleared with an unsparing hand, and with good results. Long grass and rushes fringed the water's edge, the moorfowl's haunt, and on a still day the clear reflections doubled each green blade, while the great stems of the firs sprang up clean and straight and strong as columns. A little boathouse stood, picturesquely shadowed, and Charlie had got out the boat before

any one saw what he was doing, and insisted on pulling them round the Pond. Harry took the other oar, Sir Peter steered, and Claudia sat looking round her, as the others supposed, with an eye to effects. She did, indeed, honestly try to call them up. But her work had suddenly become, if not distasteful, at least a labour, so that instead of the enthusiasm which used to possess her, as some thought, unduly, it required whip and scourge to hold her to it at all. And as they rowed along, through an opening in the trees, the house stood out distinctly, and, with the house, Fenwick's open window. Her eye fell upon it, and remained. She recollected how one day when she was planning and arranging, she had seen him coming along, striding through brake fern, and evidently in pursuit of her, and how she had slipped behind a trunk and so baffled his search. It was one of those little remembrances which circumstances may arm with a sting. What would she not have given to have seen him coming now! Tears, remorseful tears, gathered in her eyes, and as she glanced hastily at her companions she was sure that Harry Hilton had surprised

them. She, on her part, had surprised the look which she dreaded, and when they parted, her good-bye was wanting in the frank friendliness which had marked her greeting.

CHAPTER XI.

THE second doctor came, and his opinion was, on the whole, less unsatisfactory. He allowed that there was reason for alarm, and that some of the symptoms were perplexing, but with great care he thought it possible that a day or two might bring improvement. Mrs. Leslie also arrived, and took prompt command, although she was careful to let her hosts understand that she had left home at great inconvenience to herself.

"Such nonsense!" said Lady Wilmot to Claudia. "The great inconvenience means that she has been obliged to throw up one or two engagements. I'm sure her husband, poor man, must be grateful to us for giving him a little time in which he may call his soul his own."

Claudia looked white and worried. Her

fears had returned upon her, and she could not laugh lightly as Lady Wilmot seemed able to laugh, even when things were at their worst. Imagination often paints in stronger colours than reality; she had not seen Fenwick, and pictured him more suffering than was the case. Besides, she had just heard that the doctors could express no decided opinion for two or three days, a time which to her restlessness seemed unendurable. She looked blankly at Lady Wilmot, not at first realizing who she was talking about.

"Oh, Mrs. Leslie," she said at last, forcing back her attention, "isn't she like her brother?"

"Dreadfully. But what in a man is a nice peremptory manner, is simply odious in a woman. I wondered you didn't rend her when she talked to you in that way, and asked all those questions. And I wished you hadn't said that it was your fault."

"It was."

"It wasn't. It was the County Council's, or whoever it is who ought to see after our roads. Arthur said so himself, and he

wanted of all things to know if you were hurt."

"He is very kind," said Claudia coldly. She hated herself for minding anything at a time when anxiety held them all, but from behind Lady Wilmot's good-natured consolations it appeared to her that she detected a smile of triumph peeping out. "See what I told you!" it seemed to say, "see what he has done, and deny now, if you dare, that he cares for you!" With that "Claudia!" ringing in her ears, how could she deny it, even to herself? If no other result came from the whirl of inward questioning, it had no doubt the effect of fixing her thoughts very closely upon Captain Fenwick.

Minutes—hours—crawled by. Claudia lived upon the crumbs which were flung to her, not daring to ask for them in larger quantities. Charlie Carter departed, and she missed him because, though casual in his answers, he was sure to know what was going on in the house, and sometimes imparted his knowledge. Then she fell to working feverishly again, keeping out of doors half the day. But wherever she was,

she contrived with few and short intervals, to have the house in view, and with the house, Fenwick's window. Sometimes a white-aproned figure—the nurse—would stand there, looking out, and once when she drew down the blind to shut out the glare, Claudia went through a sudden and agonizing dread. She stood staring, deaf to one of the workmen who had advanced to inquire about a particular order, and watching the other windows to see whether the too-significant sign were repeated in them. It was on this day that when she came down to dinner she found that Fenwick had been for some hours making steady improvement, and that all were hopeful.

From this time, indeed, he improved steadily, and Lady Wilmot announced with some glee that he was only anxious to get rid of Mrs. Leslie.

"They're too much alike. They irritate each other."

"I would back Arthur's will against most people's," said Sir Peter quietly.

"Oh yes, and generally she has to knock under, but now, now that he is ill, she gets him at a disadvantage, and it is rather comic.

However, she goes to-morrow, and then, as soon as he can be moved into my boudoir, we must all set to work to make it pleasant for him."

And she flung a queer look at Claudia.

Claudia herself, in spite of the comparative lifting of the load, was finding the decisions of life not quite so simple a matter as she had imagined. Fenwick was better, no doubt, but there was still talk which made her uneasy. And though she would gladly have gone off, her work was unfinished, and there seemed less excuse for a hurried departure than before. The Wilmots might not unnaturally wonder why she went. What could she say? What excuse could she offer? What excuse, at any rate, which Lady Wilmot's sharp eyes would not see through? She must wait, hoping earnestly that she might find an opportunity for leaving before she was called upon to take her turn in amusing the invalid's convalescence.

Meanwhile, when she glanced at Fenwick's window, which was often, she pictured a much more dismal interior than facts warranted. If it had not been that the monotony of illness

must be always irksome to an active man, Fenwick would have allowed that he was well off in a pleasant room, with every luxury in papers, books, flowers, and a cheerful selection of visitors to wile away the time.

"It's better, anyway, than grilling in India, with fever on you, the temperature anything you like and a little more, and the punkah gone to sleep," he admitted one day when Sir Peter had left his wife to the not uncongenial task of raising her cousin's spirits, which happened to be rather depressed.

"Thank you," she said politely.

"Well, isn't it?" he returned, glancing at her.

"I don't know. But I prefer gratitude not altogether expressed in negatives."

"You know what I mean," he said rather sulkily. "How much longer am I going to be tied by the leg?"

Lady Wilmot was a born matchmaker. Her eyes began to sparkle.

"Never mind. I'm certain she's thinking of you a great deal."

"That's nothing," he returned, in the same tone. "It's her way to take things violently. But if I'm only a weight on her conscience,

as soon as I'm all right again, she'll fling me off."

His cousin buried her head cosily in a soft silk cushion.

"I wish you'd tell me seriously, Arthur, whether you really mean it?"

"Of course I do."

"You always say of course—each time."

"Well, this time I've broken my leg over it. I couldn't do more, could I?"

"No—o—o," replied Lady Wilmot doubtfully.

"I know the symptoms, as you infer, and I assure you I never had them so strongly before."

"You used to tell *me* that."

"They weren't to compare. One lives and learns."

"You looked wretched enough," said Lady Wilmot, sitting up indignantly. "I'm sure I never saw such a contrast as between you and Peter at the wedding. Every one noticed it."

"It didn't last. Look at us now. Peter —Peter is getting—well, let us call it broad—— I say, hands up! Don't pitch things at a man that's down."

"I wonder your illness hasn't made you

more truthful! What will you say next about Peter?"

"I don't want to talk of him at all. He doesn't interest me."

"Shall I call the nurse?" inquired Lady Wilmot, rising with dignity.

"No, no; sit down, and tell me more about Claudia. It's awful to think how much time I'm wasting."

His cousin settled herself once more against the cushion, took up one of the pugs, and smiled in token of forgiveness.

"I'm not so sure," she said doubtfully.

"Pity?"

"And remorse. You see, Charlie Carter was for ever dinning into her that it was all her fault."

"It wasn't, really," said Fenwick, hastily. "I can't exactly explain."

"Oh, I can! I've felt all along that she was trying to avoid a crisis. You're so dreadfully impetuous."

"I like that! If I had only chosen to be impetuous, as you call it, Peter would have been nowhere."

"Perhaps, if you're expecting me to help you, you'll condescend to talk sense."

"Oh, you'll help; you're dying to be at it."

She vouchsafed no reply.

"I'll tell you one thing you can do," he said eagerly. "If you really believe she's feeling a bit sentimental over my spill——"

Lady Wilmot was playing with her pug's ears. She interrupted sweetly—

"I think she feels the injury to your bicycle very much."

"That's all the same thing. Then, whatever happens, don't let her go till I'm about again, or stretched on a sofa, or something effective. Let her fuss about with the trees as much as she likes."

"She can fuss, of course. But she has said a few words which make me think she wants to be off, and I'm not sure whether——"

"Whether?"

"If she sticks on here, whether she mayn't find her remorse just a little boring?"

"No, no, she mustn't; it will grow for being fed upon. Look here, Flo, don't make me out too well."

"I don't think you're very ill."

"I'm recovering gradually, only gradually. The least disturbance may throw me back."

"Oh!"

"And meanwhile I'll harry Spooner till he lets me be carried into your sanctum. What's the good of all their carrying dodges if they don't use them?"

Lady Wilmot put down the pug, rose up, and glanced mischievously at her cousin.

"Well, I hope you really mean it this time. Remember Helen Arbuthnot."

"If you talk about remembering," began Fenwick boldly. She was gone.

It must have been this conversation which made Lady Wilmot after luncheon walk with Claudia towards the Black Pond, and become enthusiastic in her praises of what had been done.

"We are so delighted!" she said. "Of course Peter thinks about the estate and all that kind of thing, but I think of Marjory. It's such a comfort to feel that by the time she grows up, she'll have a decent-looking place of her own ready for her, and really my heart sank when I brought her here after poor old Sir Ralph's death."

Claudia was pleased, but said quickly—

"I shall soon have finished."

"Oh no," said Lady Wilmot. "I know

Peter wants your advice about some outlying things. Why should you go? You are your own mistress, aren't you?"

With a pang quite new to her, she owned that she was.

"And I heard you say you had no other engagement. Then what stands in your way? Don't say you find us horrid!" she added, with a gravity which concealed a smile. "Your going would be an awful disappointment to poor Arthur."

"But he is much better?"

"Better—yes. But I am afraid it must be a long business, and"—she hesitated—"don't you think he deserves a little reward?"

The girl winced and grew pale. As Fenwick said, she took things violently, she was at an age when she unconsciously exaggerated her own importance in the world, and it seemed to her as if all manner of tremendous issues hung upon her answer. Besides, up to now, since the accident Lady Wilmot had not dropped such a hint. Her heart beat too fast for her to speak. At last she turned a white face upon her companion.

"I don't know," she said vaguely.

Lady Wilmot drew her face towards her and kissed her.

"Stay!" she said lightly.

"Very well," returned Claudia, drawing a deep breath.

For in that moment she renounced all—freedom, ambition—something within her whispering persistently that if she stayed it would be to become Arthur Fenwick's wife. Her thoughts were sufficiently in a whirl for her not to know whether the conviction brought delight or terror, but they had fastened themselves upon him so continuously of late, that quite an unexpected feeling had sprung up in her heart, so that, if she were not in love with himself, she was nearly so with the image she had created. Her very indifference became a wrong when she reflected that it had caused him such suffering.

Lady Wilmot's sympathy was of a light-hearted nature, it was not profound enough to enable her to plunge into depths, but Claudia's was a sufficiently transparent countenance to betray that it cost her a struggle to utter these two words, and if there was a struggle, it probably had to do with more than the mere fact of going or

staying. She therefore hastened to encourage her.

"I am more than glad," she said smiling. "To-morrow that odious Lady Bodmin—as Peter isn't here I may abuse her—departs, and though the Comyns are due, I am not quite sure that Mr. Comyns and Arthur hit it off very well; at any rate, I don't think Arthur cares much for either of them. So I particularly want him to have something pleasant to look forward to."

Instinctively Claudia turned and faced her.

"Will he care?"

She spoke the words scarcely above her breath, and was hardly aware that in a sudden craving for sympathy and counsel she had uttered them.

"Will he?" Lady Wilmot laughed out. "If you could have heard him to-day when I told him you had talked of going!"

Claudia walked on silently. The longing had changed to shrinking, and she wished that Lady Wilmot would leave her, but instead of this she ventured on another step.

"I assure you," she said, "that Arthur is a dear fellow."

"Oh, don't let us talk about him any

more!" cried the girl with sudden passion. She felt tossed, dragged, buffeted, a very shuttlecock of circumstance, impatient of the insistent tones in which that "Claudia!" still rang in her ears. Harry Hilton had also uttered her name, but it had not stirred her in the same imperative way, it had not been emphasized so disastrously, or burnt upon her memory. She trembled as she spoke, and Lady Wilmot looked at her with some bewilderment as to the cause of her emotion. She was not quite sure that it boded well.

"No, you are right, we won't talk about him any more," she agreed soothingly. "You have promised to stay, and that is all we wanted. I foresee that after all we shall have a good time, and I am so glad, for Arthur has always been my favourite cousin, though he is sometimes tiresome, and I have always tried to help him to what he wanted. It used to be jam out of the housekeeper's closet," she added, with a laugh.

The girl would not laugh. "She takes it all so seriously!" Lady Wilmot explained afterwards to her husband with light compunction. "Dear me, Peter, if I had thought so tremendously about such episodes, you'd

have married a wreck! So far as I can remember, I used rather to enjoy them."

This was not Claudia's condition. Enjoyment! It was misery; expectant, frightened, yet entrancing misery, such as she had never pictured to herself. It had been altogether different with Harry Hilton; she had scarcely thought of him except as a momentarily disturbing incident, and, quite sure that his healthy young face would never pale a shade, no idea of suffering had so much as crossed her mind. She flung him a restless thought now and then, comparing the two men, and certain that all the intellectual advantages were heaped on Fenwick. His natural gifts were varied, and he knew extraordinarily well how to make them appear at their best, helped to it by a dominating vanity, at once so strong and sensitive, that it never landed him in ridiculous positions, as may easily be the case with a coarser kind. Claudia, for instance, had never guessed its existence. She thought of him as a shrewd keen man, forgave him some shortness of temper, and liked the touch of roughness he occasionally showed. It had struck her that Miss Arbuthnot cared for him, and that

he was indifferent, so that his evident attraction for herself flattered her. These were trifles, the real tie lay in his dash to her rescue and consequent suffering. Nothing could have smitten down her spirited independence so completely as the knowledge that he lay helpless owing to what he had done for her; it was the very thing to make her feel that any sacrifice must be made which could compensate.

CHAPTER XII.

HELEN ARBUTHNOT was used to come and go as she liked at Thornbury, but it was not very often that she returned within a week of taking leave. She had done so now, making some slight excuse, which for hospitable Mrs. Hilton was unnecessary. The talk often fell upon Fenwick's accident, and she knew that Harry had been to Huntingdon. Ruth Baynes described how an accident, not certainly identical, but still an accident, once befell her eldest nephew. Helen listened in silence until she had Harry alone.

"There's no actual danger, is there?" she asked indifferently.

"Sir Peter said there was. At least the doctors were at fault."

She had followed him into the gun-room, where he was rubbing the stock of a gun.

"Then I suppose you'll be going over again?"

"Not again. Somebody will write."

She tapped the wooden arms of her chair impatiently.

"Oh," she exclaimed, "you're the most lukewarm of lovers! I've no patience with you!"

"Can't be helped," he exclaimed, polishing laboriously.

"It can. Don't you see that it's nothing short of unfeeling to show no anxiety when—when your Claudia has nearly brought herself and her career to an end?"

"She's all right. Besides, my Claudia, as you call her, isn't mine at all, and doesn't mean to have anything to do with me."

"Only because you're so wrong-headed. Didn't I advise you to keep quiet?"

"Yes."

"And now I advise you to move. And you do just the contrary."

He had his back turned to her.

"Didn't it really ever strike you," he said, "that Fenwick cared?"

After a moment's hesitation, she answered with a change of manner and a laugh—

"Oh, how like a man! When he takes a fancy he thinks every one else must be possessed with it too!"

She ceased, however, to urge him, for good-tempered as he was, he could stick to his point, and she saw that he was resolved not to go again to Huntingdon. He had made this determination partly because he could not see Claudia without disturbance, and his healthy nature objected to the stirring up of emotions which could lead to nothing; and partly because in spite of Miss Arbuthnot's taunt he was persuaded that Fenwick liked Claudia, and a love of fair play inclined him to keep out of the way at a moment when his rival might be supposed to be at a disadvantage. It would not have changed his conduct had he known the truth, that, in his disabled condition, Fenwick, passive, was making such way as he might never have done had he been about as usual.

Only Miss Arbuthnot's pertinacity had led to the conversation. She did not renew it, and he was not the man to care to talk of his own feelings. At the end of a few days better news arrived from Huntingdon, and Helen departed as suddenly as she had

come. Then it was that Harry became more restless. Thornbury had too many bitter-sweet recollections, Huntingdon was too easily within reach, at Elmslie he might hear something of Claudia, and at Elmslie he would meet with Anne Cartwright's tender sympathy, never wanting in tact. At Elmslie, accordingly, he presented himself one day, unannounced, but certain of welcome.

It was Philippa's shrewdness which first discovered that the times were out of joint.

"Something has happened," she said to Anne, "and whatever it may be, take my word that Claudia is at the bottom of it."

"Why?" said Anne, startled. "He hasn't talked of her at all."

"And that's why," retorted Philippa. "When he left he was on the way to talk a great deal."

"Then do you suppose—— ?"

"Yes, I suppose she has refused him, and that you will soon hear more about it. He is much too good for her, but I imagine you can't tell him so?"

"Now you are unfair."

Philippa laughed, shrugged her shoulders,

and went off, rattling her keys. Anne, after a momentary hesitation, left the house, and strolled down to the river, where she found Harry smoking, with Vic stretched by his side. Looking at him with keener attention, she saw something in his eyes which told her that her quicker sister's surmise, at least as to his unhappiness, was right. He jumped up, and she put her hand on his arm.

"I'm too old for damp grass, but here's the bench which Claudia hated." She added, very kindly, "What is it, Harry?"

He laughed queerly.

"Nothing out of the common. I've had a spill, and the world is going round a bit —that's all. It'll steady itself by-and-by, no doubt. You can't do anything, Anne, and I'm sure I don't know why I tell you."

"Is it Claudia?" asked Anne unheeding.

He nodded.

"And——?" She paused.

"She didn't give me any hope, and I can't persuade myself that I've the ghost of a chance. Still—I suppose I should feel worse if there wasn't one." He broke off and laughed again.

"She is very young. Oh, I shouldn't despair yet," urged Anne, born consoler. "Don't you think you've been hasty?"

He pulled Vic's soft ears.

"Perhaps. I couldn't wait."

"Well, as I say, I wouldn't despair. Give her time."

"She hasn't said anything herself?" He was thirsting for a word.

"No. Indeed, Philippa and I have been puzzled that we have heard nothing from Claudia since she first went to the Wilmots'. We don't want her to feel bound to write, but generally she does. I suppose this explains it."

"You know about the accident?"

"Accident? No," said Anne, with alarm.

"Oh, she's all right. But Fenwick, who was with her, got let in rather badly." And he gave her a brief account of the disaster.

"Oh, poor child!" cried Anne. "How terrible for her! That explains, of course, particularly"—she smiled—"because she knows we are old-fashioned enough to be a little shy of bicycles. Come, Harry, it seems to me that you have despaired too soon. Try again, later. Her head is filled with other

ideas now, but give her time and she will come round."

Irony is apt to follow on the heels of good advice.

"I don't know," said Harry slowly. "I haven't quite told you all."

She waited.

"This other man, who got the chance——"

"Captain Fenwick?"

"She thinks me a stay-at-home duffer, as I am; while he—he's a clever chap, and has been about, and can talk of the things she fancies, and—well, it can't be helped! Look here, Anne, Philippa must really speak to Smith about that hay."

If it had been a relief to him to say so much, he was evidently indisposed to say more, and, Anne not being one to force confidences, they talked of indifferent matters, went to see the rick, strolled round the kitchen garden, ate apricots, and were turning towards the house when a maid came out, bringing a letter.

"Oddly enough, this is from Claudia," exclaimed Anne impulsively.

The next moment, as she glanced through it, she repented having spoken.

"What's wrong?" demanded Harry, watching her face. As she hesitated, he added quietly, "You had better tell me."

"It is from Claudia."

"So you said. Well?"

There was a new peremptoriness in his tone which she recognized.

"She writes about what we talked of," she said, with difficulty, and keeping her eyes fixed on the letter. "She—she is engaged to this Captain Fenwick. You may read the letter, if you like," she added more quickly, holding it out to him. He did not take it, and there was a moment's silence.

"Thank you," he said, and no more. His voice was hoarse, and she longed to comfort him, not knowing how, and casting about for words.

"This accident——"

He interrupted her.

"It's over and done with—we won't talk about it. Can I do anything for you in the town?"

Anne felt with a pang that it was not as in his old boyish troubles, and that the best she could do was to stand aside, and take

no notice. She went off with her letter to Philippa, who was not very sympathetic.

"I'm not sorry. Harry will meet with somebody else, somebody, I do hope, without a career. Of course he feels it at first, but he'll get over it, oh yes, Anne, I'm hardened enough to think so. Give me the letter. What does she say?—um—um—um—'saved my life at the risk of his own'—that's strong—'dreadfully hurt—getting better'—I don't see what else she could do—'stay on here for another week or two before going back to Elmslie.' One thing is certain, Anne, we needn't have had that new carpet for the bedroom."

"She doesn't say much," commented Anne.

"No, not much. I wonder—— "

CHAPTER XIII.

IF the wonder Philippa expressed related to Claudia's own feelings, she need have had no misgivings. In spite of hesitation, reluctance, beforehand, in spite of the coldness which stiffened her on the first day that she saw Fenwick in Lady Wilmot's den, she was becoming, daily, shyly, yet radiantly happy. Fenwick's treatment of her was subtly admirable. Her reserves, her pride, raised all his masterful instincts, and perhaps the sudden check to his active physical life inclined him the more to concentrate his energies upon conquering her love. It gave these energies a field. More than once she would have revolted from the touch of the new emotion; quivering and startled, she was inclined to fly, and it needed just the treatment he knew how to apply, to soothe her. The first sight of him,

stretched helpless, had struck at her heart. The readiness with which he tossed aside her stammering words of regret made a direct appeal to her own generosity, and day by day the bond tightened. He knew —none better—how to play upon her ambitions and interests, talked as if they would continue, planned what further opportunities might be hers, let her suppose that here was perfect, satisfying sympathy, until it seemed to her that a delightful confidence had sprung up between them, such a confidence as even the college had never afforded. He waited for this, waited until, after some tentative advance and shrinking, it stood strong, and the rest was curiously easy. A few sentences instinct, as he knew how to make them, with all that was both tender and dominant, finished his work; Claudia was his almost before she realized that she had yielded, before Lady Wilmot, who was flitting in and out, could frame a tidy excuse for leaving the two alone. And it was extremely simple. Fenwick looked into her eyes, and thought them charming; she, trying to meet his with her usual frank directness, faltered, and could not face them.

Then he whispered three words, and she made a mute sign, eloquent in its vagueness. No collapse could have been more complete, nothing could have been more unlike the manner in which she resolved to go through such a scene when, like other girls, she had rehearsed its possibilities. Claudia had always supposed that she should marry, and, when the moment came, intended to speak decidedly, very decidedly, to her lover, and let him make his choice; either take her with the understanding that she would stick to her profession, and accept whatever ties it imposed, or not take her at all. It is true that she almost invariably pictured him as yielding, but she meant to be dignified and quite firm; reflecting with contempt that the old ways of love-making were altogether unsuitable to the new girl, who was made of different stuff.

And this was the result!

Nothing, as she had to own, could have been less impressive than the figure she had cut; nothing more commonplace than the words spoken, except that she had a saving conviction that no one had ever spoken them with Fenwick's strength, and this made a

difference. Indeed, although she was obliged to own that she had failed, the fact did not seem to trouble her. She looked in the glass, and smiled at her own dimpling face, remembering what he had said; and recollecting further that she had heard him remark that he liked a particular shade of yellow, sat down and wrote to London for an evening frock of that colour.

As for the obnoxious pocket-book, it remained where it had been laid the day before.

When she was alone, or with Fenwick, Claudia's happiness was like herself, eager and brilliant, for all happiness takes its colouring from the person it touches. With others she was not altogether at her ease, having an unacknowledged suspicion that Lady Wilmot was smiling in her sleeve, as indeed she was, and broadly.

"Because it is so amusingly unexpected," she informed her husband. "No two persons could be more unsuited to each other."

Sir Peter twinkled.

"Is that recommendation likely to last?"

"She was so *very* indifferent, so *very* much swallowed up by her own ideas," pursued

his wife, unheeding; "and Arthur has a way of expecting women to flutter round him, and be flattered when he speaks. Oh, he's a very good fellow, but that's his little weakness, and that's what makes me laugh. But I'm really extremely glad. It's much better for him than marrying a woman like —well, for instance, like Helen Arbuthnot, all bitter herbs."

Sir Peter, who was well aware that his wife was not without her jealousies, let this statement pass uncontradicted, but spoke a word or two as to Claudia.

"I suppose she knows her own mind? She hasn't been talked into it?"

"Talked! When she was as easy to get at as a prickly pear. What a dear old donkey you are, Peter! I would have given her all sorts of good advice, and told her a hundred and fifty useful things, but I never had the chance. No. It's very odd, but I can tell exactly what brought it about, and it's only another instance of Arthur's extraordinary luck. You know that day we went to Barton Towers?"

"Well?"

"Well, he said something which startled

her, and, to stop it, away she dashed down the hill, and then came the smash up."

"You call that luck, do you?"

"Certainly," said his wife, with dignity. "What's a broken leg or two?"

"No one would mind it, of course."

"It will mend up all right, and it made Claudia listen to him. I should hope you would not have objected to breaking both legs on the day you proposed to me."

He flicked the ash off his cigar.

"Nothing of the sort was necessary," he remarked. "You were too happy."

Lady Wilmot sighed.

"How little you know! I've never liked to tell you, but—you're sure you won't mind?"

"Go on."

"As it happened, I tossed up."

"Tossed up?"

"You see, there was nothing else to do. I couldn't make up my mind between you and Lord Baliol, so I thought of this plan, and you happened to be heads. I shall tell Marjory about it when she grows up. It's so simple!"

"I dare say. And suppose the wrong man comes up?"

"Oh, then she needn't pay," explained Lady Wilmot, escaping with a laugh. "A woman has always that in reserve."

It seemed, indeed, as if Fenwick's recovery became extraordinarily, almost suspiciously, rapid. After two or three days' rain the sun shone bravely again, and he was carried out on the lawn. He chose to have Claudia at command, and as she was scrupulously conscientious in wishing to finish her work, she used to be out at the earliest hour possible, planning and arranging, and leaving directions for the woodmen to carry out. Fenwick, on discovering this, declared she looked fagged.

"I won't have you do it."

"But," she protested, half laughing, half vexed, "it has to be done."

"Not it! I'll talk to Peter. I'm your first consideration."

And she yielded. Indeed by a sort of rebound from what Lady Wilmot had called prickliness, she was now extraordinarily yielding, finding it delightful to give up her will to his. Lady Wilmot, who had expected amusement from the situation and was disappointed, shook her head, and even went

so far as to warn the girl that there was not a man in the world who could bear spoiling. Claudia was indignant. Fenwick drove her in a low pony carriage for the first time that afternoon, and as they went along the lanes she told him.

"Don't let Flo lecture you," he said quickly. "I won't have her interfering."

This fell in with her own desires and she agreed happily. She drew a long breath of content as she spoke. All at that moment seemed perfect, and, looking back, she wondered at nothing so much as her own hesitation. The day was bright and touched with keen exhilaration, the road, cut through deep hedges, ran, richly shadowed, up and down hill, and a fresh wind drove the clouds overhead. They passed the blacksmith's forge, and a dog flew barking after them, then they went up, up, up, past white cottages, each standing in its garden, and Fenwick let the reins lie loosely on the pony's back. When they reached the top they stopped. Behind, and on one side, the woods of Huntingdon, gaining dignity by distance, swept down the valley, while in front spread a fair broken view of pasture land running into blue

upland, and darkened here and there by veiling cloud. It was Claudia's moment of absolute content, and Fenwick broke it.

"I spoke to Spooner to-day about getting away."

"What did he say?"

"He thinks it's all right, and that I can go soon."

"But——" She hesitated shyly. Fenwick bent forward and untwisted a rein without looking at her. "Doesn't he think you ought to keep quiet a little longer?"

"I dare say. But one can't stick in one place for ever." Then, as if he realized that the words might convey a pang, he added quickly, "Of course it's delightful, only I must get back to the camp, where another fellow is howling at having to do my work."

"I see," said Claudia, in a low voice. The pang had just touched her, but she would not acknowledge it. "And I have been here an unconscionable time. I shall go to Elmslie, and if the Wilmots want me again about anything, I can run down later on."

"Oh, they won't want you," said Fenwick, dryly. "Well, go to Elmslie for a week or

two if you think you must, and then come to Aldershot, and stay with Gertrude."

"Will she have me?"

He smiled at her.

"Won't she? I believe you'll enjoy the life there immensely."

She was quite happy and gay again.

"And by that time your leg will be well, and we shall be able to go all over the country on our bicycles."

"I think not," he returned rather grimly. "I don't care to see a woman at that work near the camp."

"Oh," she cried impetuously, "I thought you were quite above that sort of thing!"

"Did you? I'm not, then."

His tone was the same, and she hesitated. Then she said more slowly—

"You're not afraid for me, are you? Of course, when I was so stupid the other day, it was only because—because——"

"I'm not afraid," he said, touching up the pony. "I think you manage it very fairly well. I don't care about it for you—that's all. Except quite in the country."

Her dismay was so evident that he turned and looked at her.

"My darling, do you really mind very much? For my sake?"

"For your sake?—oh no," faltered Claudia. "It isn't the bicycling, but—I—I thought we should have done so much together, and —do you mean that you have always disliked it?"

"I don't object to it in some places, or when it isn't carried to extremes. Besides, there are sure to be occasional opportunities."

He had her hand in his, and she could but smile and submit, and resolve that there should be no opposition where he felt so strongly. Perhaps, though he disclaimed it, the accident had left him nervous on her account, and, by-and-by, when he had forgotten, his dislike would subside. But, to her dismay, she found that many things of which he had hitherto spoken lightly, and, as she thought, approvingly, were not at all to his taste under the altered condition of things. She began to be aware that he was binding her round with small restrictions, pushing her into the very groove against which she had revolted, and, worse than all, ridiculing the revolt itself. He no longer restrained his mockery of her enthusiasms,

enthusiasms which she had fondly imagined he shared. If she talked politics, Fenwick's face darkened at the opinions she expressed, and he told her in so many words that he did not wish her to allude to professional duties, or even to think about them any more. It is true that these demands were sweetened by the passionate vibrations of the voice in which he told her that he loved her, and at such moments all sacrifice for love seemed joy; but when she was alone her thoughts were not so restful and satisfied as in the first days. She even began to long for a breathing space at Elmslie, when she would no longer be swept away by his impetuous will, and could, as it were, stand, recover her breath, and face the changed view in which life confronted her.

It came at last. Fenwick intended to have taken her himself to Elmslie, but was summoned to Aldershot a day sooner than he expected. And Claudia, Claudia who despised those girls who could not travel alone, was obliged to put up with the guardianship of Lady Wilmot's maid, and to go first class, with her beloved bicycle in the luggage-van.

CHAPTER XIV.

CLAUDIA had her breathing space, and at first enjoyed it. Her cousins were kind without being curious ; she could say as little or as much as she liked about her engagement, and only Emily, Emily, whose remarks she assured herself she did not mind, so much as hinted at the changed circumstances of her career, for which, as she could not yet forget them herself, she was grateful. Nor, although she heard of Harry Hilton's visit, and, putting two and two together, realized that it coincided with her letter of announcement, could she accuse him of having said anything to prejudice her in her cousins' eyes. She would not have been sorry to find fault with him, but she had to own that he had behaved very well, and there was even a moment when the thought flashed upon her that, in his hands,

her liberties would not have been so circumscribed as now appeared probable. She drove it indignantly from her. What was Harry by the side of Arthur Fenwick?

On the other hand, Philippa maintained that Claudia was decidedly the better for her engagement. She said to Anne—

"She has gained broader views, and is not nearly so self-absorbed. The man must be a man of sense. She does not force her plans for reforming the world down one's throat with such vigour; indeed, I am almost inclined to doubt whether she now altogether expects to reform the world. That is, indeed, a discovery!"

Anne, kind Anne, smiled and sighed, with thought of Harry.

"I do hope that she likes him."

"Could he have worked such a miracle if she did not?"

In Claudia's mind there was no doubt. Away from Fenwick, his vigorous personality impressed her the more, and she told herself that his love was such a gift as would make a woman gladly give up all that clashed with it. There was something almost pathetic in her anxiety to put away what she had learnt

to see that he disliked, and, though her strong young nature would always demand outlet for its energies, she hastily accepted what little was common to other girls and other lives about her. Her beloved pocket-book was laid aside, or only looked at surreptitiously, she wrote to the college, renouncing all wish for engagements; she cut tickets for Emily, took her bicycle into retired roads, never once tried to shock the Dean's wife, and controlled her very hand-writing. It was natural enough that after the first welcome breathing space such a life of suppression should soon weary her, and that she began to count the days before she might get her invitation to Aldershot.

Once and once only was Harry specially alluded to.

"Mr. Hilton has been ill again," Philippa announced, folding a letter. "Poor Harry!"

Claudia imagined a reproach.

"Why should you call him poor Harry?" she said shortly. "I never saw any one quite so much his own master. Nobody at Thornbury thinks of contradicting him."

"Let Anne enlarge," said Philippa laughing. "It's her topic."

"Life has been for him one long contradiction!" Anne exclaimed, nothing loth. "I dare say he never told you how his whole mind was set upon being a soldier, and how he got into the very regiment he wanted, and then had to leave on account of his father's illness?"

"No," returned Claudia, slowly; "he never told me."

"Then, when Mr. Hilton was better, he had a chance of going out to South Africa, and it was the same thing over again, the scheme completely knocked on the head. No one could know Harry, with his love of sport and roughing it, and suppose for a moment that his home life is what he would choose. But, as he never dreams of complaining, his giving up all he cares for is taken as a matter of course."

Anne spoke with quite unusual vehemence, and Claudia reddened and did not answer. A month ago, she would have made light of such a tale, but love had already taught her something of its divine power of self-sacrifice, and it touched her. At the same time, by one of the contrarieties of a woman's nature, she felt indignant with Harry because she

had been the means of losing him another of life's blessings. Why had he been so stupid? He had only to hold his tongue for them to have remained excellent friends. Then she fell to wondering whether, if the same accident had threatened her when Harry was by her side, he would have acted as Fenwick had acted, and was the more vexed to have to own that he could have done nothing else. She wanted, it will be seen, to keep all the glory for her special hero, but the mental training she had received, would not allow her to make her mind a present to her emotions.

They left her, however, restless, and she regretfully decided that Elmslie was dull, and looked impatiently for the invitation to Aldershot. It came quite as quickly as was possible, Fenwick took care of that, and then she—she, Claudia!—had to wait for an escort, to Philippa's private and unbounded amusement; for although Fenwick wished her to have a maid, space was too limited in the hut to receive her, and that concession to helpless young ladyhood, as Claudia scornfully called it, had to be postponed until her return. Finally she went off in

the companionship of two of the Dean's daughters, and Mrs. Leslie's maid was to meet her at the junction where they parted. The bicycle was left behind, and Emily commented—

"How odd! I thought you took it everywhere."

Claudia was trying to forget this innocent speech as she whirled along in the train by the side of the Dean's daughters, who, had she but known it, were as much astonished at the reversal of the position as she could be, but it rankled. She had made larger concessions without feeling as sore as she felt through the journey, and was only soothed by the glad sight of Fenwick's tall figure on the junction platform, in place of the maid she had expected. The next moment she frowned. He was not alone, Mrs. Leslie was with him, and she felt oddly shy. She reflected, further, that the Dean's daughters had done nothing to require so many thanks.

"As if I were a helpless parcel!" she murmured rebelliously.

It was unfortunate, for it revived the spirit of antagonism which had met Mrs. Leslie at

Huntingdon. There, however, Claudia had seen but little of her, here she was somebody to be taken in hand, advised, checked, arranged for, informed that Arthur did not like this, that, or the other, and treated in fact as a very average young woman of early years, whose inexperience required superior counselling.

"Arthur's is a curious nature," said his sister on the morning after Claudia's arrival.

The girl lifted her eyebrows.

"I think I understand him. Few persons do," pursued Mrs. Leslie, reflectively, "and I always felt anxious that his wife should be a person of experience. You will require patience, for one thing, I warn you."

"Perhaps he will require it, too," said Claudia, with a short laugh which made Mrs. Leslie look at her.

"I hope not," she said gravely. "I don't think his stock is large. I advise you to be the one to yield."

Claudia found this and similar hints maddening, but when she carried her indignation to Fenwick, he was disposed to take his sister's side.

"She has rather a peremptory manner,"

was the utmost he would allow. "It's only manner. She's had to pilot old Leslie along, and very well she's done it."

"I dare say. But I don't require piloting," said Claudia stiffly.

Fenwick smiled, and her colour rose.

"What do you mean?"

"By what?"

"By looking like that."

He rose and stretched his arms.

"My dear Claudia, you're in an aggressive humour to-day."

Her heart smote her. "I believe I was cross," she said with difficulty. "I thought that she—Gertrude—treated me as if I was a child."

"Learn philosophy," he said, with a yawn. "What does it matter?"

It is very well to be told to study philosophy, but there are times when the advice carries insult with it. Claudia jumped up and stood at the window. From thence she shot a glance at him. He was not looking at her, but strolling about the room, taking up a book here and there.

"They've made themselves pretty snug here," he remarked at last. "Gertrude

thoroughly understands how to rig up a hut."

"I like the Marchmonts' better," said Claudia coldly.

"Do you? Tastes differ, but it isn't really so good. Thornton, now, has dropped into comfortable quarters. By the way, somebody said that Miss Arbuthnot was due at the Thorntons this week."

Claudia was cross, and, conscious of it, tried to swallow her displeasure.

"We met her yesterday," she said, "and —didn't you hear?—somebody else said that she was going to be married."

He turned sharply.

"Married? Miss Arbuthnot? Don't believe it."

She opened her eyes at his tone.

"Why? Is there anything extraordinary in the fact?"

"Oh no," he said, recovering himself rather awkwardly from the momentary excitement. "It's the sort of thing which is always being said of her. She's food for gossips. And it never comes to anything."

"It will have to come soon, I suppose,"

remarked Claudia, with the scorn of twenty-one for thirty-one.

He took no notice of this, but as Mrs. Leslie came into the room, turned sharply upon her.

"Gertrude, what's this about Helen Arbuthnot?"

"Helen!" reflected Claudia.

"Colonel Tomlinson said she was going to marry Lord Dartmoor's eldest son."

"That stick! Rot!"

Mrs. Leslie looked at him with warning in her eye.

"Really, Arthur, I don't see why it shouldn't be true. She is sure to marry somebody."

"Somebody, perhaps. It needn't be a fool."

He spoke savagely, and Claudia wondered why. His sister made haste to change the subject.

"Remember, Claudia, that there is the polo match this afternoon. We must go."

The girl flung an imploring glance at Fenwick.

"You?" she said inquiringly.

"I can't," he returned. "I'm going to

try a little bicycling of the most feeble description to suit a cripple."

"Oh," she cried eagerly, "do let me come! The Marchmonts said I could always have one of their bicycles, and it would be delightful. Please, Arthur!"

She went close to him, and he played with the frill of her sleeve.

"Delightful, but not to be done. I hate to see women bicycling about these places."

"But," she urged, "you used to go with the Marchmonts. They told me so."

"He wasn't engaged to a Marchmont," said Mrs. Leslie, arranging her flowers. "That makes all the difference."

"Why?" asked Claudia. As no one answered her question she turned again to Fenwick, "Won't you let me come, this once, this first time? You really may want help."

"I should say he had better look after himself—this time," said Mrs. Leslie pointedly, and Claudia crimsoned.

"I'm all right," said Fenwick, stretching himself again. "Look here, Claudia, go to the polo, like a good girl, and—if I can, I'll drop in there later."

She said no more, and though she had a sense of defeat, it did not prevent her from becoming absorbingly interested in the rush and energy of the polo match. The day was both bright and showery; every now and then a sudden storm sent the carriages under the trees, then the sun broke out again, and no one was much the worse. As the afternoon wore on, her attention began to flag, for she expected Fenwick. He came late.

"How have you managed?" she asked eagerly.

"Well enough. I didn't go far." More hesitatingly he added, "I turned in at the Thorntons'."

"Then," remarked his sister, "you heard whether the report about Helen Arbuthnot is true?"

"I heard nothing."

"I wonder she did not tell you."

"There was an excellent reason," he said curtly. "They weren't at home. What's Bateman racing for?—oh, a new stick. I say, Lucas got that goal cleverly! I wonder what he'd take for his pony."

Claudia's eyes sparkled. "I wish, oh, how I wish women could play polo!"

"Good heavens! I'm thankful they don't attempt it!"

She turned upon him with a laughing retort, but something in his face checked her. She said the next moment, "There is Miss Arbuthnot."

Fenwick looked without making a remark, and exerted himself for Claudia's entertainment. Before long, however, he left her, strolling over to the carriage where Helen sat. She gave him the slightest of greetings, but, undismayed, he folded his arms on the side of the carriage, and talked in a low voice.

"I have been to see you."

"How judicious of you to choose such an admirably safe hour for visits!"

"Is that all you have to say after what I've been going through? Weeks on a sick bed!"

She looked at him between half-shut eyes.

"Haven't I seen you since? Oh, don't expect me to pity you. I believe your accident was simply an ingenious plant, to get what you had set your mind upon. By the way, let me offer my congratulations."

"Thank you. You are very good.

Rumour says you will soon be requiring the same."

"Yes?"

The word was distinctly interrogative. Fenwick found himself pondering what it carried with it. Miss Arbuthnot's appearance was prosperous, her tone—provokingly indifferent—stung him into retort.

"Does yes signify yes?"

"I have never yet been sure. It so entirely depends on the speaker."

"Then," he returned boldly, "in your case I should say it meant the opposite."

Miss Arbuthnot appeared to consider.

"You were never backward in assertion," she said. "Tell me, has your Claudia really given up her career and her pocket-book?"

"Do you suppose I should allow my wife to make a fool of herself?"

"Oh, forgive me! I did not know you were married."

"You know, at any rate, what I mean."

"Perhaps. By the way, I left your rival on a fair way to recovery."

"My rival?"

"Your friend, then—Harry Hilton. He

is an excellent fellow, and honestly, I think he would have been more suitable to Claudia."

"Thank you," said Fenwick grimly. "It seems she did not think so."

"No. We women are so slow in learning our lessons that we are left with no time in which to use them."

"You must have learnt yours, then, at an early age."

The two fencers looked at each other, and she bent her head slightly.

"Yes. I have at least learned to take the goods the gods send."

"Meaning Mr. Pelham, and a future twenty thousand a year?" Fenwick shot out sharply.

She raised her eyebrows.

"Possibly."

He suddenly drew back, and went to the other side of the carriage. Claudia, in the pony-cart, had lost her interest in the match. She made only monosyllabic replies, but she was listening intently to Mrs. Leslie's remarks, more than one of which related to Miss Arbuthnot. Finally she said—

"I wonder whether the report about her

is true? It would be curious if she and Arthur married in the same year."

"Why curious?"

"Because at one time—— Oh, well," she added with a laugh, "you can cross-question Arthur."

Claudia made no answer; she seemed to be taken up with a wild gallop of the ponies across the ground.

As they drove home they passed the Thornton carriage, and were stopped by a sign from its mistress.

"Captain Fenwick has gone," she said, "and has half promised that you will all dine with us after the inspection to-morrow. Will you?"

Mrs. Leslie hesitated and accepted. Miss Arbuthnot, who had nodded to Claudia, now leaned forward.

"The Thornbury trees," she said, "are beginning to recover from the shocks you gave them, but Harry has to go and explain and apologize to them. I know he apologizes."

The girl had not time to answer; the pony did not like stopping, and whisked them away.

"Helen was looking very well," remarked Mrs. Leslie. "What was she saying about the Thornbury trees?"

"I had to cut down a few"—Claudia hesitated—was it possible she was becoming reluctant to allude to what had been her pride?—"I went down there, you know"—she lifted her head, and out came the obnoxious word—"professionally."

"Good gracious, what do you mean?"

"Has Arthur not told you that I was—that I am a landscape gardener?" asked Claudia, with all the dignity she could call to her aid.

Mrs. Leslie broke into a peal of laughter.

"My dear child, I beg your pardon, but you are so comic! Arthur's wife a landscape gardener! How long have you played with this amazing fancy?"

"It has not been play," said Claudia stiffening. "I went through a regular training, and have had two engagements." And then she broke off suddenly with a miserable wonder how the engagements, in which she had felt such an honest pride, had come to her. One was through Harry Hilton, and the other through Fenwick.

Could it be possible! She murmured the Wilmots' name, and Mrs. Leslie's next words completed her humiliation.

"Oh, the Wilmots!" she said, still laughing. "Flo will do anything for Arthur."

"Do you mean——" began the girl hotly.

"Oh, of course they liked having you" —Mrs. Leslie felt that she had gone rather far—"but I tell you honestly that I suspect it was more because you were young and pretty, and perhaps because it amused them to see you taking life so seriously, than on account of your—what am I to call it—profession?"

"Call it what you like," said Claudia proudly, and staring in front of her. "We are not likely to agree in the view we take of it. I have been brought up to think that idleness is not the desirable element in a woman's life which you all seem to consider it. As for Arthur, if he is ashamed of it for his wife, he has changed very much since he talked of it a few weeks ago."

She made her little speech quietly and well, though her voice trembled as she ended, because she could not but feel that he had changed.

"Settle that between you," said Mrs. Leslie, in a light tone. "It doesn't seem to me at all his line."

When she could get hold of her brother, she attacked him. "Arthur, why didn't you give me a hint? What extraordinary craze is this of Claudia's? Do you know that she calls herself a landscape gardener?"

He frowned.

"Has she gone back to that rubbish? I thought it was at an end. Though, mind you, there was something very engaging in the serious view she took of her duties. She hadn't a thought to fling in another direction."

"Absurd! And you encouraged it?"

"It was the only way of getting at her. Besides, I knew if once I made her care, I could stop it, and stopped it I have, unless you have rubbed her the wrong way again. How did you come upon it?"

"Helen Arbuthnot alluded to the Thornbury trees. I can't think why Helen has come here now," said Mrs. Leslie impatiently. "I wish she were married and done with."

Fenwick made no answer. Possibly he had not heard.

CHAPTER XV.

THE march past was one of those brilliant spectacles with which the camp delights its visitors. Royalty was there—indeed, royalties had gathered; the day was perfect, not over-hot, with fleecy clouds flinging soft shadows on the downs. There were the usual manœuvres on the Foxhills; there was the usual futile thirst for information as to what was going to happen, and the usual ignorance; the usual anxious dread on the part of husbands engaged lest their wives should get in the way, and stop the advance of a regiment; the usual thrills of pointing interest over distant puffs of smoke or gleaming metal; the usual captive balloon, and not quite the usual amount of dust. Claudia, eager and ready, was more like her usual self than she had been since her arrival at Aldershot, keenly interested, and rejoicing

quite unduly when she found that Fenwick's battery was on the conquering side. Then came the stirring march past, artillery waggons lumbering along, cheerful regimental bands, a change, a skirl of pipes, and to the proud defiant tones of "The Campbells are comin'," the Argyll Highlanders swung by in splendid barbaric dress, like a company of giants. Claudia's eyes were bright, and she did not so much as hear her companion's criticisms. Fenwick's battery passed early, and, leaving it, he came back to where his sister and Claudia stood in the foremost row, for the girl had been far too much carried away to consent to remain in the carriage. He looked approvingly at her sparkling and animated face.

"You should not have been in this place, though," he said to his sister. "You'd have seen better on the other side of the Duke."

But Mrs. Leslie demurred.

"Colonel Manson advised us to come here, and nothing could have been nicer. There, we should have had horses all round us."

"Well, they wouldn't have hurt you. Come along now, and see the end of it."

"Why should we? Stay here, Claudia. You won't get such a good view higher up."

The girl thought the same, but went. As soon, however, as Fenwick reached the coveted spot, he began to discover its shortcomings, and to complain of the dust and glare. Claudia laughed.

"Let us go somewhere else," she said. "I don't mind."

"Well, all the best is over, and there's no fun in sticking through it to the end. I want to speak to Lucas over there about his pony."

"Is that the polo man?"

"Yes."

"And are you going in for polo?"

"Not unlikely. If I do, I shall do the thing thoroughly, and his is about the only pony I fancy."

"I shouldn't think he'd care to part with it."

"So they say."

Something in his tone told her that in the difficulty lay the attraction. They walked across the broken ground to the spot where young Lucas stood, and he laughed the suggestion to scorn.

"Sell Tommy!" he said. "My dear fellow, not if I know it!"

"Well, if you should——"

"But I shan't. I shall have to be stone broke first."

Fenwick went on unheeding—"Let me have the refusal."

"Oh, as to that, all right! If worse comes to the worst and I've got to run, I'll leave word that Tommy is yours. Will that suit you?"

"Down to the ground."

Both men laughed, and as Claudia and Fenwick walked away, she said—

"I'm afraid you'll have to put up with another pony."

"Not I!" he returned. "It's Tommy or none. But I shall get him."

She glanced curiously at him.

"Do you always get what you want?"

"Pretty generally. When I set my mind upon it."

"And," she went on slowly, "do you always care about it when you have got it?" But she did not wait for an answer. "Look," she said, "all the carriages are on the move, so it must be over. I'm sorry, for it has been delightful."

For a minute he made no reply. Then he asked suddenly—

"Who's that man with the Thorntons?"

"Gertrude fancied it was very likely Mr. Pelham."

"What an ass the fellow looks!"

To this she made no answer. Fenwick was silent and abrupt; he took her to Mrs. Leslie, and then left her to ride back to Aldershot.

That evening was the Thorntons' dinner, and Claudia, who plumed herself upon her own powers of independent decision, found herself swept away by Mrs. Leslie.

"What are you going to wear?" she asked. "It had better be the green. I'm sure Arthur would prefer the green."

And green she wore, although she scourged herself with hard words as she dressed.

"It only remains to stick a white camellia in my hair, and go down, blushing and simpering behind ringlets. Whose business is it what I wear? Why do I give way? Why can't I hold my own? Oh, Claudia, Claudia, is this the end of all your fine theories?" And then the anguish of a question broke from her, a question which

she had been pressing down, dreading that if once it took form it might be unanswerable —"Does he care? Does he really care? He did, when I did not, and why was he so cruel as to force me into loving him, if he was not certain of himself? If I were only sure of him, should I mind one bit all his sister's domineering ways? Not I! I could hold my own against her, wear what I liked, say what I liked, do what I liked, in spite of all the 'in laws' in the world. But now she has me at a disadvantage, and knows it. He is behind her, and when she says, 'Arthur prefers this, Arthur chooses that,' all the resistance goes out of me and leaves me a limp coward. I fancy that she must know best, and that I had better do what she suggests, and I am not myself one bit. I have never been myself since I came here. I am just somebody else, and worse, for I am just the sort of girl I so despised, the very feeble creature I could not have imagined myself sinking into. How we used to laugh at them at the college! How the girls would laugh if they could see me now! And I am afraid I shouldn't even mind their laughing. I am fallen too low to have any

self-respect left, and I know that if I were only sure in my own heart, I should give up all that I cared for—everything—for him, just as he made me tell him I could; if only, only, I were convinced that he felt the same now that he did. And perhaps he does. Perhaps it is only that I don't quite understand. Perhaps it is all part of my turning into an idiotic girl. Perhaps all men—nice men—are the same. Certainly, I should hate his taking too much notice, being too effusive, too silly! I dare say it is only a foolish fancy of mine. On with your green frock, stupid Claudia, and for pity's sake look at things healthily, instead of taking to morbid fancies!"

She sighed as she finished, but no self-harangue could have been wiser, and she resolutely set herself to carry it out; bore without flinching Mrs. Leslie's comments upon her dress, and tried to be quite content with the young subaltern who fell to her lot at dinner, while to Fenwick was given Miss Arbuthnot, and Mr. Pelham took in Mrs. Thornton and sat by the side of Miss Arbuthnot. Claudia even tried to convince herself that the arrangement was one she would

have chosen, because she was thus able to look at the others. She was curious to know whether the story of Helen's engagement was true.

"She does not say much to him," she reflected, "but—as Arthur said—he does look rather a nonentity. And then she and Arthur have known each other a long time, and he can be so pleasant, and able to talk of things which I dare say that other man knows nothing about. It is odd, though, that when we were at Thornbury it never struck me that they were particularly friends." She stifled another sigh. "I suppose I was taken up with other things, and didn't notice. Well, now I mustn't stare at them so much, however interesting it is. I must talk to this poor boy next me, who is smiling, and quite pleased all about nothing."

"Your Claudia looks pretty to-night," Miss Arbuthnot was remarking. She put up her glasses as she spoke.

"My Claudia—as you call her—has a trick of looking pretty."

"She has, and I never denied it. But she has upset my theories. I thought she would prove herself indifferent to you all for some

time to come. Oh, don't smile! A man may be vain—he can't help himself, I suppose, but when his vanity peeps out it is insupportable."

"Have you impressed that upon the individual to your right?"

"Time enough," said Miss Arbuthnot coolly. "Besides, you are mistaken. He is not vain."

"Fortunate man to have secured you as his advocate!"

She was silent.

"What other excellent characteristics does he boast?"

"I did not know we were talking of him."

"Oh, I must talk. I have been thinking of him ever since yesterday."

"And why yesterday?"

"Because it was then I heard what the world is saying."

"I should have thought you of all men would have hesitated to believe what the world says."

"Is it wrong, then?" asked Fenwick eagerly.

She made a movement as of balancing her hands.

"It may or may not be. You will see."

"You speak as if it were a matter of indifference," he said so bitterly that she slowly turned her face towards him, and lifted her eyebrows.

"As it must be—to you," she replied coldly.

"Forgive me—that is impossible," he said, dropping his voice, and staring before him. The next moment Miss Arbuthnot was addressing a remark to her other neighbour.

Fenwick marched up to Claudia directly the men reached the drawing-room. The Thorntons lived in the permanent barracks, and the regimental band was playing on the drilling ground.

"How are you getting on? Bored?" he inquired.

She might have said no if she had been an older woman. As it was, she replied truthfully that she had been, and allowed her eyes to express the pleasure she felt.

"Every one was out of place at dinner. Mrs. Thornton pitchforks people about." He spoke almost apologetically, and added quickly, "That's a pretty frock you've got on, Claudia."

"Is it?" She blest it.

"But," he went on, giving way to some inward irritation, "I agree with you that it's an awful bore having to come out in this way among a lot of people who can only talk rot. As for that"—he indicated Pelham with a movement of his head—"I should be surprised to find that he owned a single idea."

He spoke with unusual bitterness, and the girl looked at him, surprised. Fenwick not infrequently showed temper, but it required more to excite it than an occasional foolish young man, whom it was quite easy to avoid. Evidently, however, he was put out. He found fault with the band, with the airs they played, with the quarters, and, indeed, impartially, with whatever topic presented itself. Claudia, armed with a new forbearance, exerted herself to charm away the mood, and partly succeeded. She was conscious that, as he had implied, she was looking her best, and that when his eye fell upon her, it softened. Yet, by a curious contradiction, she was also conscious, and it gave her such a sick conviction of impotence as she had never before experienced,

that he was not always attending to her, and, even worse than this, that she was beating her brains for some subject with which to divert him. She knew but little of those everyday topics to which most of us fly as to blessed houses of refuge. She had really bound herself, as Philippa quickly discovered, in narrowest fetters, flinging a strong personality into one interest, of which being suddenly deprived, she became like a dislodged hermit crab, unable to find another resting-place. But she knew this much, that two persons in full sympathy with each other, would have no need to seek for common subjects of interest. The love which Fenwick's vanity had set himself to awake, was indeed alive, stirring feelings partly of passionate joy, and partly sharp anguish; but she was also aware of strange forces which seemed to draw her in directions where she would not go, and of vague disturbances for which she could not account.

It was a curious moment now for a swift flash of such discomfort to dart through her, yet here it was, and for just that moment it blinded her to her surroundings. She looked

up with a start to find Fenwick on his feet, and Helen Arbuthnot standing before her. Helen was holding out her hand and smiling.

"As you would not come to me, I have come to you," she said. "So I hear you are no longer a lady of the woods, but have joined the ordinary ways of us mortals."

Claudia coloured. She was taken by surprise, and thought Miss Arbuthnot showed bad taste in harping upon these topics. Displeasure made her answer as she might not otherwise have done—

"I hope to be in woods again one day."

"Really?"

Somewhat to her surprise, Fenwick came to her assistance.

"As she has nothing of that sort here on which to expend her energies, she is going to take up the moral improvement of the British soldier instead. I hear her asking very searching questions on the subject."

His tone was light but not sarcastic, and Claudia turned and smiled at him.

"That's not fair," she said. "I only asked questions because I know absolutely nothing."

"I should ask questions too, if the answers

weren't so unsatisfactory," said Miss Arbuthnot, taking the chair Fenwick had left. "Don't you find that people always know either too much or too little? But of course at this point it is for Captain Fenwick to answer any questions you may be pleased to put."

The girl, who was shy of open allusions to her position, was annoyed by Miss Arbuthnot's manner. At Thornbury she had almost liked her, and to Thornbury she returned, ignoring the last remark.

"Can you tell me anything about Mr. Hilton? I hope he is better?"

"I suppose so, but I don't know why you should hope it. Life can't give him much pleasure, and he manages to make it a burden for everybody else, especially for Harry."

"Oh, Harry! Harry's a lucky beggar," said Fenwick. He had not sat down, but stood with his hands behind him, holding the back of the chair against which he leaned.

"You say so? That's what comes of not grumbling. I should like to see you doing Harry's work for a day. We should all hear of it," she added sarcastically.

"Oh, praise him as much as you like,"—was there a slight emphasis on the him?—"you are right, he deserves it. Granting a few limitations, Harry Hilton is a first-rate fellow."

He looked at Miss Arbuthnot smiling, she, too, smiled back. Claudia, on the contrary, frowned slightly, not from displeasure, but from a feeling of being puzzled.

"Now that they are both engaged they seem on better terms than they were before," she pondered. "I wonder why it should be, I wonder what has brought them together?" For she knew they had not met. The next moment she heard Miss Arbuthnot being invited to drive on the Artillery coach.

"Thanks, no," she said indifferently. "I've too much on hand just now."

"To go about with—him, I suppose," he said sharply. "But you can bring him—if you must."

"What a real gush of hospitality!" she returned in a mocking tone. "Alas! even if I must, it is doubtful whether he would."

"Well—ask him."

"I think not." She stood up as she spoke, massive and handsome. "I don't

think it would be any use. But I am going back now to talk to him."

Claudia watched her cross the room, and caught Mr. Pelham's beaming look.

"Oh, it must be true, he looks so happy!" she cried impulsively. "And, Arthur, I think you are hard on him. He has quite a good face."

She did not catch Fenwick's muttered ejaculation—"Confound him!"

CHAPTER XVI.

CLAUDIA'S young and vigorous interests were attracted by all that was connected with the camp, too much so, indeed, to please Fenwick. She ran out whenever a regiment passed, or when she heard distant sounds of drill.

"You don't want to be shown the stables, do you?"

"Oh, I do, particularly."

He gave way, but with a discontent which took the pleasure out of it. Another time he remarked to his sister—

"Can't you give Claudia a hint not to be so tremendously excited about the band in church? She talked of it to Dawson till he must suppose she comes from the wilds."

Something in his tone made Mrs. Leslie look at him in dismay.

"Arthur," she said impressively, "you are not getting tired of her, are you?"

He turned angrily upon her.

"Tired! Rubbish!"

She went on, disregarding.

"It would be simply disgraceful. I should be ashamed to look any one in the face. First Helen Arbuthnot, and then this poor girl."

"Have you done?" he said savagely.

"No. I mean to speak. I must. I have thought at times, I own, that in spite of the break off between you and Helen, you had a sneaking kindness for each other, but now you have both split away in different directions, so that is quite at an end."

"She's not married yet, and I don't believe she can like that idiot," growled Fenwick.

"Arthur!"

"Well?"

"You're not——"

He interrupted her.

"What have I said? Nothing about marrying her myself, have I? Take my advice, Gertrude, and don't meddle. I've never stood meddling yet, and I'm not going to now. Mind you, this doesn't matter to you or to any one else."

"It does matter," she persisted. "With the girl in my house, I am certainly responsible."

"I deny it. If she's satisfied, what have you to say?"

"Oh," she said impatiently, "of course she's satisfied! You know how to talk, and it is easy enough to please a girl of that age."

"Very well, then. By your own showing, you've nothing to say. I'm going to marry her, and that's the end of it."

Fenwick was not a pleasant person to have an argument with; almost invariably it brought out in him a certain hard tenacity, which made other men angry. Perhaps Mrs. Leslie was less sensitive to it than was the rest of the world, but even she shrank from the shock of clashing wills, which more than once had led to a bitter dispute between brother and sister. The conversation, however, had left her distinctly uncomfortable, and she reflected long whether she should give Claudia a hint. Yet it was difficult to know how much or how little she should say, and it seemed better that if nothing were really amiss, the

girl should not have her suspicions raised. Only—for she was really a conscientious woman, and Claudia was a fatherless girl—she resolved that if things became worse, she would take her part determinedly against Arthur or any one else. And this not so much from liking as from an innate feeling for justice.

Unfortunately, her hidden fear did not act very wisely. It made her watchful and almost irritable with Claudia. She could not say in so many words, "Don't do this, don't say that, your fate is trembling in the balance," but she contrived to convey it in her actions, growing so evidently anxious over the most trifling movements or expressions, that the girl, in spite of indignant self-protests, became nervously inflicted by her companion's distrust, and developed a new self-consciousness. She grew restless too.

"I do wish you would not give yourself so much trouble over my amusement," she said one day to Mrs. Leslie. "For instance, please don't imagine that it is necessary for me to go to the club-house every afternoon."

"One must go somewhere," said her hostess vaguely. She could not explain

that she had offered the pony-cart to Fenwick for him to drive Claudia into the country, and he had refused it.

"I don't see that," said the girl, with a laugh. She added after a pause, "What I really should like would be to bicycle over some of the country round. But Arthur won't hear of it."

"Don't tease him about it, pray don't," said Mrs. Leslie, with over-expressed anxiety.

Claudia looked at her.

"Why?" she asked, and such interrogations were becoming more and more difficult to answer. Mrs. Leslie was hesitating over it when the young subaltern, Claudia's neighbour at the Thorntons' dinner-party, looked in.

"You'll forgive my coming at this unearthly hour, won't you?" he said. "Fact is, Major Leslie asked me to tell you that you and Miss Hamilton had better come out. Orders are given that the Scots Greys are not to be allowed to get back to barracks, and he thinks you might like to see the fun. Can you get along by yourselves? I must be off."

Mrs. Leslie jumped up with a sense of relief, but she was an imprudent woman, and her imprudence broke out.

"Why couldn't Arthur have let us know?" she said in a vexed voice. "There, I have let the children go off, and Frank will be so disappointed!"

"Perhaps Arthur didn't know himself."

"He must have found out by this time. However, be quick, Claudia. We can't wait for the cart; we'll walk."

Claudia did what she was often doing at this time, hastily packed misgivings out of sight, and they started. Rain had fallen in the night; great pools of water stood waiting to be sucked up by the yellow soil, and massive banks of clouds moved sullenly to the east. Out from behind them the sun had flashed, and was shining steadily, transforming all he touched, and bringing, as he does in our northern lands, no languor, but an added energy. Now and then a body of troops marched briskly along up the road, passed the cavalry barracks, and turned to their right.

"Where are the Greys, I wonder?" said Mrs. Leslie impatiently. "I hate to be left

in this way, knowing nothing of what is doing."

Claudia had no answer ready, and they went on. Presently her companion broke out again—

"I always vow I will not come and see these things from the outside."

"How can one see them otherwise?" asked Claudia, in good faith.

"Oh, you must know what I mean. I call it outside when you toil along roads as we are toiling, and have no one to tell you where to go."

"As to that, I suppose they're all trying to cut off the Greys."

"Ah, you're not married," said Mrs. Leslie gloomily. Presently she stopped. "I don't see the good of going on."

"Oh yes!"

"Most likely we are all wrong."

"One can't tell—nobody here ever knows what's going to happen next. Suppose we walk across to that clump?"

"Well——" began her companion, turning reluctantly. The next moment she exclaimed, "Here comes the Thorntons' carriage; we can ask them."

Instinctively Claudia longed to break away, but, instead of doing so, stood still and tried to look indifferent. Mrs. Thornton was driving Miss Arbuthnot, and, before there was time for inquiry, called out—

"You're going the wrong way. You should make for that mound." She flourished her whip.

"Who told you so?"

"Captain Fenwick. He looked in to say that would be the best place."

"Really?"

"*So* sorry we can't give you a lift!"

"Oh," said Mrs. Leslie mendaciously, "we prefer walking. So I do," she added as the carriage rolled away—"so I do, to going with her. She irritates me. She's always in the right. But I think it was simply abominable of Arthur."

"What does it matter?" said Claudia, with a fine display of indifference.

"It matters a great deal, because, of course, if I had known it was going to be so far, I should have brought the carriage."

"Well, don't let us toil to that mound. Let us go to the place we intended before. It is such a pretty day!"

"I dare say it is, but we didn't come out to see the country."

To her surprise, however, by dint of a little more pressure, Claudia carried her point, with the result that they saw nothing. But this she did not seem to mind, for she talked and laughed vigorously, in spite of many "I told you so's" from Mrs. Leslie.

"You are the oddest girl!" exclaimed that lady at last.

"Why?"

"Because you don't appear to care to stand on your rights. Now, I think that Arthur has behaved shamefully."

It is certain that she would not have spoken so imprudently if she had conceived it possible that a young girl of Claudia's inexperience could seriously resent her lover's conduct; she only considered it desirable to point out to her that she might be too easy with him, and that it would be better for her were she to assert herself. And the girl's own anxiety to hide her wounds added to Mrs. Leslie's failure to understand her. She showed no disturbance.

"Aren't you hard on him? He may

have been close to their quarters," she suggested, "and just turned in."

"I dare say! He would not have found it so convenient if Helen Arbuthnot hadn't been there." Mrs. Leslie liked to justify her statements.

"No?" said Claudia indifferently. It would have taken a close observer to note a certain slight rigidity in the way she carried her head.

"No. My dear Claudia, it's all very well to be magnanimous, but if you expect peace in your married life, you had better make up your mind to the fact that Arthur—though a good fellow in the main—is a bit of a flirt."

Claudia did not turn her head.

"I dare say," she said coolly, so coolly that Mrs. Leslie prepared to strengthen her warning.

"And I advise you to show him you don't like it—beforehand."

"Thank you."

Mrs. Leslie could not have quite explained the character of this "thank you," but she preferred to consider that it breathed gratitude; and, the morning having in other ways

proved such a dismal failure, accepted this as partial compensation, feeling that now she had done her best to open Claudia's eyes, and that, whatever happened, she could not be blamed for having uttered no warning. She had been altogether tired and annoyed by her long vain tramp, and was not in the mood to spare her brother. Claudia, too, had been so provokingly quiescent that it was only to be supposed she did not see, and Arthur's wife would require to have all her senses about her.

She therefore carried home both a grievance and a sense of fulfilled duty; which, together, make a person pretty nearly intolerable.

But, though Claudia kept her proud silence, and could even say "thank you" to her counsellor, it must not be supposed that she was patient at heart. It was not this or that trifling circumstance; they were not the events of the morning, taken by themselves, which affected her; it was that, gradually, little by little, the conviction forced itself upon her that Fenwick no longer loved her, nay, possibly, that he was loving another woman. Why it should be so, she struggled

to fathom, and failed. Why, when both were free, he should have preferred her to Helen Arbuthnot, who could tell? Only that it was so, she could now scarcely doubt. And with a yearning which seized and shook her with the violence of its desire, the motherless girl longed unutterably for some one to whom she could turn, some one who could give her the aid for which she was groping. What ought she to do? How do it? How, even if her love were smitten, maimed, down-trodden, should her womanly pride keep its dignity, and shield her from the pitying scorn with which she knew the world regarded a jilted woman? One day, although it was understood that she did not go out by herself, she slipped away, and, finding a church open, went in, and in its quiet silence, poured forth a torrent of tears and prayers, which brought relief.

Her fears, like much else characteristic of Claudia in those days, were young, crude, and ill-balanced. Later on, she would have known that the world casts a few sentences, a few jibes, and has forgotten, before the sufferer has time to realize that the thing is known. Everything whirls past; we and

our petty concerns, whisked to the surface one moment, are swept under the next. But, as with other things, it takes years to teach our inexperience the lesson.

There was another difficulty. Think as she might, plan as she might, Claudia could not see before her the words or the moment she wanted for letting Fenwick know that he was free. There were times when she thought of rushing back to Elmslie, but to do this until the explanation had been made, was, she fancied, impossible. She had come for a three weeks' stay, and of this only a fortnight—was it credible? only a fortnight!—had passed. Then the college—for a moment she reflected hopefully on the college, and some proffered engagement. But, alas! again. Engagements did not pour in every day, and she flushed furiously as she realized that her own, which she had proudly regarded as an offering on the shrine of emancipated woman, were more probably due only to the efforts of two men who liked her. Humiliating conviction! Besides, at Fenwick's instigation, she had obediently written a request to the principal to withdraw her name from the lists of those seeking employment.

Look as she would, she could not clearly see the road by which she might escape; yet each day seemed to make her position more unbearable.

And Mrs. Leslie, Mrs. Leslie added tenfold to her difficulties, and this with the best intentions in the world. Claudia's wounded love flung itself for support on her woman's pride; like her race she could endure magnificently, if only she were allowed, unquestioned, to hide the anguish of the wound. But Mrs. Leslie saw too much, pointed out what the girl would fain have passed over in silence, grumbled, protested, excused. She was personally affronted with her brother, and used Claudia as a weapon of retaliation. She did not approve of Helen Arbuthnot, she considered that Arthur was behaving scandalously, and she felt a large degree of responsibility for the girl under her care; so that it was constantly—"Well, certainly, Arthur, you have been most attentive to Claudia to-day!" or, "If I were Claudia, I should not thank you much for looking in upon me at the end of the afternoon;" or, "Claudia and I seem left very much to our own devices!" And these reproaches, uttered

before Claudia herself, had the effect of paralyzing the girl, and of taking from her what seemed her own just cause of complaint.

There were dangerous moments, too, when Fenwick, smitten with remorse or swayed by caprice—who can say?—regained his old ascendancy; when she could almost believe that all was as it had been, moments when he was charming, tender; moments, alas! too fleeting, but sweet enough to make her own with a pang that if only they lasted, she must still be his. For the sake of their delicious glamour, a weaker nature might have readily consented to keep its eyes blinded, and to believe that all would yet be well. But Claudia was not weak. Her training, whatever else it had done or left undone, had exercised her intellect, and given her powers of self-control which came to her rescue now. She saw clearly that when Fenwick was charming, it was because he had made up his mind to charm; that it was not due to spontaneous love, but to intentional love-making, and that such intervals were succeeded by evident indifference.

CHAPTER XVII.

MISS ARBUTHNOT was everywhere, and Mr. Pelham shadowed her. Opinions were freely bandied as to the existence or non-existence of an engagement, the majority inclining to the belief that one existed. Fenwick, on the other hand, was seldom seen near her, Mrs. Leslie began to recover her equanimity, and perhaps only Claudia was aware that when he was in the same room with Helen his eyes followed her, or that he was more than usually silent and self-occupied. She was invariably well dressed, in a manner which set off her large figure; people turned to look at her as she passed, and she seemed to fling into insignificance such slim beauties as Claudia. Whether from chance or intention, the two seldom said much to each other, but it happened that one grey afternoon at the

club-house, they found themselves near each other watching a game of bicycle polo.

Miss Arbuthnot deliberately walked up to Claudia.

"Detesting games! I am bored to death," she said, "and so—I imagine—are you. Don't you think we should suffer less if we escaped beyond the sounds of croquet and lawn-tennis, and everything except the clack of our own voices?"

Claudia hesitated, and Helen added—

"You had better come. I assure you there are times when I can be intelligent, and Captain Fenwick will not be here just yet."

The girl walked quickly on as if she had been stung.

"What has that to do with it?" she said recklessly.

Miss Arbuthnot was engaged in disentangling a bramble which had caught in her dress. When she looked up she said coolly—

"A good deal to me. You know—or do you not know?—that I have always liked him."

Amazement struck Claudia almost speech-

less. She stammered with her sudden rush of anger.

"You tell me—you can tell me——"

"The truth. Isn't that always desirable? Besides, after all, have I said anything that should affront you? That I liked him. That was my remark."

There was a pause.

"It implied that he liked you," said Claudia, more calmly, though still choking.

"Oh, not at all. Does the one thing invariably imply the other?"

It might have been that there was—it seemed so to Claudia—a touch of mockery in the question.

"If not——" she began hastily, and stopped.

"If not, you think I was a fool? Well—perhaps. We were engaged, at any rate."

"Oh!" cried the girl, stopping short. This was more than she had dreamed of.

"You did not know it? But I imagine you are prepared to hear of such episodes?"

Is any woman prepared? Claudia bit her lip to keep back the answer she would have liked to fling at her tormentor, and Miss Arbuthnot went on—

"It did not last very long. To adopt the

stock phrase proper to these humiliating occasions, we discovered that we had made a mistake. Probably you wonder why I am going back to that not too-agreeable time. I will tell you——"

"Don't!" cried Claudia, quite suddenly. She hardly knew what she said, conscious only of a sharp thrill of pain, and a sickening dread of worse to come. Miss Arbuthnot glanced quickly at her, and went on as if she had not spoken.

"It is because I am certain you are falling into the same mistake."

She turned away as she spoke, and stood resting her arms upon a railing. Behind her she heard the girl breathing heavily. Then it seemed as if Claudia made an effort to speak, for her voice was strangely hoarse and low.

"This is unendurable!" she said.

"Oh no," returned Helen, "not by any means unendurable. The unendurable is when you have made the mistake permanent. If you could bring yourself to admit it to me —and you might, since I have gone through the same humiliation myself—you would own that you are uneasy, shaken, unhappy. I

don't know what plan you adopt with him, perhaps you reproach him—I found it irresistible—perhaps you take refuge in silence. Take my word for it, there is no remedy in either. Love has flown, and you will never whistle him back. Be thankful he did not stay longer. Hug the wound, if you will, but go."

Perhaps, in the sick bewilderment of the moment, the sensation uppermost in Claudia's mind was vexation at the manner in which Miss Arbuthnot reviewed the position. She spoke with a cool confidence always impressive, and she seemed to be able to express herself dispassionately, as if she were no more than a critic, looking on from the outside. It was true that she had taken extreme care to place herself on the same level with Claudia, but the girl was too angry and excited to accept this fellowship. It was, indeed, made impossible to her by the unacknowledged conviction that the dominion Miss Arbuthnot once possessed, she had, in some inexplicable manner, regained. She stood pale, furious, yet trying hard to prevent excitement from showing itself in voice or manner.

"Why do you say this to me?"

"Ah, why?" returned the other, lapsing into her usual careless tone. "To tell you the truth, you have me there. I did not intend to speak. I thought you might find out for yourself, but—who can account for impulses? Perhaps I imagined it might shorten the business. I see that so far I have failed, and you are only angry."

"Angry!" Claudia flung back her head impetuously. "That isn't the word."

"Well, I won't use a stronger," said Miss Arbuthnot, with an amused smile. "I dare say I should have felt the same myself. Yet, look at the matter philosophically. You only hate me for speaking, because your heart tells you I am right."

"Oh, for more than that!" broke in the girl wildly.

"For more than that?" The older woman turned and glanced curiously at her. She went on slowly. "You think, perhaps, then, that I am the cause of your unhappiness?"

"Yes, I do. I think that you are treacherous, treacherous!" cried Claudia, stung beyond control. "You failed to keep his

love yourself, yet could not endure to see it given to me. You set yourself to take it again—— "

Her voice failed—choked. It was Miss Arbuthnot's turn to grow a little pale, and she stood for a moment staring out at a bit of near common, across which soldiers were marching, light now and then flashing on their accoutrements.

"But—if I have proved to you that it is worthless?" she said slowly at last.

"Ah!" exclaimed Claudia scornfully, "do *you* think it worthless?"

Then Helen Arbuthnot did a strange thing. She turned and looked into Claudia's eyes, her own unflinching, and she spoke as people speak in a great crisis of their life.

"Before Heaven, I do," she said, "and that although I once cared for it more than for anything else in the world. Now have I set myself low enough?"

Something in her words, but more in the manner of their utterance, had indeed shaken and curiously affected Claudia. They might have been spoken by one who cared enough for her to venture much on her behalf. And yet they came from the lips of Miss

Arbuthnot, the woman whom she had just accused of acting towards her in the most heartless manner in which woman can act towards woman, and who at this moment, she believed, was holding her love up to scorn. For a moment she was shaken, but she recovered herself.

"You own you want it yourself!" she cried relentlessly.

The other still gazed at her for a moment, and then her mood changed. The fire died out of her eyes, her look relaxed; she laughed, though not mirthfully.

"Ah, well," she said, "I have already made you a present of the situation, so far as I am concerned. Doesn't that mollify you?"

"So far as you are concerned!" Claudia repeated with scorn. "Oh, you are very much concerned! The situation, as far as I can read it, is that you are trying to persuade me to take myself out of the way, in order that you may feel still more perfectly free."

Miss Arbuthnot looked at her once more.

"Do you not see," she said slowly and cruelly, "that you are not in the way? It

is what he cannot have which has the attraction for Arthur Fenwick."

Was it so? The girl breathed hard, and put the question a second time.

"Then why do you speak?" She had forgotten Helen's words.

"Ah, why? That's what I have asked myself half a dozen times in as many minutes. Answer it as you like. Perhaps I love meddling."

She turned as she spoke, and began to walk towards the club-house. Claudia, hot, bewildered, angry, marched by her side, unwilling either to go with her or to remain behind. She felt bruised and beaten, yet, after all, the pain came from an unacknowledged source. Were they not her own convictions which had taken shape from the mouth of another?

Before they reached the garden, Fenwick met them. His first glad look, his first glad word, were for Helen.

"At last I have escaped!"

It was little enough, but there are times when a little does as well as a great deal. He recollected himself, it is true, and turned sharply to Claudia, but she could have sworn

that the exclamation neither belonged to her, nor was caused by her presence. It was to Helen he had escaped. She tried to speak quietly, though her tongue felt stiffened.

"I see Gertrude on the croquet ground, and she must be wondering what has become of me."

If she was abrupt, she could not help it, yet, as she went, she was bitterly conscious that a short fortnight ago, Fenwick would have been almost tiresomely scrupulous that she did not cross the ground alone. And still, with her wretchedness, there was something of the joy of restored freedom. The shackles which she had worn gladly when she believed they belonged to excess of love, galled again, as soon as the love was wanting; so that when Mrs. Leslie, vexed with her brother, vented her vexation on Claudia by whispering—

"Where is Arthur? My dear Claudia, you really ought not to walk about all over the place by yourself; he will be so annoyed!" the girl's answer was a repetition of his words. She drew a long breath.

"At last I have escaped!"

Fenwick, meanwhile, was in the midst

of an interesting conversation. Both he and Miss Arbuthnot followed Claudia with their eyes. Then Helen turned hers upon him.

"Well?" she said.

He thrust his hands into his pockets.

"She can take care of herself for once. And—I never see you."

"I should have said we met fairly often."

"I don't call it seeing to find you engulfed in a crowd."

She lifted her eyebrows. "Since when have you been so desirous for a conversation *à deux?*"

Fenwick looked at her hardily. The look did not seem to agree with his words.

"You might have a little pity!"

"I have a great deal. I have just been expressing it to your Claudia."

He frowned.

"To Claudia? And pity for me?"

"Oh no!" said Miss Arbuthnot in her softest voice. "For her."

This time there was a short silence. Fenwick walked away a few yards, and came back to where Miss Arbuthnot still stood waiting.

"You are right," he said in an altered tone; "you are right. From beginning to end it has been a miserable mistake."

She expressed no surprise, the two appearing to understand each other. She only inquired—

"And what do you intend to do?"

"I must go on with it. We must marry," he returned moodily.

"Certainly," said Miss Arbuthnot briskly, "certainly. No other course is open to you."

He looked at her again.

"And yet you haven't a word of pity to throw!"

"Why should I? You are marrying the girl you chose, a nice girl, too, who had no thought of you until you insisted upon her falling in love. And now that you have got her there, you are discontented. Pity! Yes, I pity her with all my heart!"

He still kept his eyes on her.

"You won't be any better off yourself," he said with significance.

She turned and faced him.

"What do you mean?" she asked coldly.

"That fellow—that Pelham—can you tell me honestly that you care for him?"

"You have no possible right to put such a question," she said haughtily. "Be sure of one thing. I do not marry the man I do not care for. Here we are at the polo again, and here is Mrs. Menzies."

Fenwick had his dismissal, and swung away in a rage, angry with Helen, angry with Claudia, most angry with himself. He rated fate for opening his eyes when it was too late, and allowing him then, and not till then, to find out the insane folly of his conduct in letting slip the one woman for whom he was now certain that he cared. Glancing at the rapidly thinning group of brightly dressed people, he muttered an exclamation as he caught a glimpse of his sister's figure, and, with the intention of avoiding a meeting, went out of the place, and struck from the Farnborough road, with its oddly isolated groups of firs, across the common.

By this time the sun was low, and, catching the fir stems, turned them to ruddy gold. A few wild clouds, threatening storm, barred the western sky, but the threat was splendid in colour and contrast, and, while bringing out the rich tints of the near common, had the effect of only adding to the serene beauty

of the blue distance. Here and there a patch of white tents dotted a slope; smoke curled upwards from the camp fires; and an occasional sharp sound or call struck the silence. Fenwick neither saw nor heard. He walked, staring at the ground, caring nothing where he went, and only bent upon avoiding his kind.

What devil was there in him, he asked himself impatiently, which was for ever dragging him into positions from which, when his eyes were open, he recoiled? In this question which he flung, it is possible that he caught a fleeting glimpse of the inordinate vanity which was the real cause of his disasters, but vanity is too subtle an imp not to have a hundred disguises ready for such a moment. Fenwick freely cursed an impetuous nature, idleness, imprudence, and left the actual mover unscathed and grinning. He had tired of Helen Arbuthnot for the very reason that he was secure of her preference; and when he accepted his dismissal and moved away, it was with the absolute confidence that if ever he liked to step back, he would find her waiting. And now apparently—by her own act, which was

quite a different affair from his—she was placing herself beyond his reach; while he, like a raw fool, had bound himself to a girl who had ceased to be attractive from the moment in which he knew he had gained her heart.

He did not put it so crudely, nor had he any thought of drawing back from his engagement. Fenwick was an honourable man, and he fully intended not only to marry Claudia, but to make her happy. As to his power to do this, he was curiously free from misgivings. On his own future life he bestowed a groan, but she loved him, and that would be enough for her. He even went so far as to glance at some of her crude latter-day ideas, and to decide that he would allow her a certain amount of freedom to exercise them; under careful control, of course, and, above all, in ways that should bring no ridicule upon him. Such an outlet for her enthusiasms would occupy and prevent her finding out that—that—well, that he no longer felt for her all that he had imagined. How he had imagined it still puzzled him, for he had no impulse towards solving the enigma in the only way in which it could

have been solved—the confession that her cool indifference had piqued him into trying to stir it into warmth. So accustomed was he to flutter the hearts of the women who crossed his path, that to find a country girl treating him with profound carelessness, was not to be endured. It was very natural that Harry Hilton's clumsy attentions should fail to touch her—he liked her the better for being their object, and for rejecting them—but to be placed in the same category himself was another matter. Then, to win her cost him something. He had to let himself go. For a time he felt the ardour of chase, the longing to gain; some, at least, of the many sensations which help to make up love; enough, indeed, as he bitterly owned, to deceive himself.

And now, now he had won Claudia, and lost Helen.

He walked far, so that when he turned all the fires of sunset had dulled in the west, and the firs stood black against a saffron sky. The camp was alive and busy, though the more active work of the day was over. Fenwick came back as he went. He told himself bitterly that this was no more than

he expected. It was no question of future conduct which he had taken out into the solitudes to solve, but a burden which he was girding himself to bear. He had thought of himself from beginning to end, and of Claudia only as one towards whom he had a duty. For him to fulfil this was enough for her.

But he could not see her that night. When he reached his quarters he sent a note to the hut saying that he was dining at mess, and would not be able to look in. He made another resolution, which appeared to him an admirable example of sacrifice, for there was a party to which Miss Arbuthnot was bidden and not the Leslies: he had intended to find himself there, and now resigned it.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE result of Fenwick's meditation might have been foreseen; he felt himself the injured person, and went resignedly to the hut on the following day, prepared to act with magnanimity. Claudia met him as simply as usual, showing no trace of displeasure. A close observer might, it is true, have noticed that she was both pale and heavy-eyed, but, except under the influence of a dominant personal interest, Fenwick was not a close observer, and he merely registered a mental note that her young beauty was of too variable a nature to be counted upon. His sister, however, quickly became aware that he was himself disturbed, and she took an opportunity of calling Claudia into the next room.

"Something has gone wrong with Arthur,

I can see. I know his face so well! Do be careful what you say," she added anxiously.

"Has anything gone wrong?" asked the girl, with a curious little laugh. "Well, don't be afraid. Perhaps I can set it right."

Mrs. Leslie shook her head. She had no confidence in Claudia's powers, and she dreaded beyond words, another eight days' wonder over her brother's love affairs. Major Leslie was waiting for her in the garden, and when she went out she was so full of her fears that she confided them, with signs towards the window.

"I am dreadfully afraid there is something in the wind. Arthur looks like a thunder-cloud."

"Pleasant for her!" said little Major Leslie, whistling.

"That's the worst of it. She might manage, but unfortunately she has no tact whatever, and Arthur will require the most delicate handling from his wife. Lawrence, this gardener is absolutely no good."

"I don't see anything amiss."

"Then look at that border."

The two wrangled, and strolled away together. Claudia, after a momentary hesitation,

a momentary locking of her small fingers, went back to the pretty cool room, and sat down on the window-seat. Through the trees came glints of bright colour, as soldiers passed up and down the road, and now and then a cheery note of bugle or pipes rose shrill above other sounds. Fenwick walked restlessly about the room.

"I suppose you'll be at the polo this afternoon," he remarked, stopping to straighten a picture, "as you're so awfully keen on that sort of thing, aren't you?"

"I suppose I am," she said slowly. "But I am not going to the polo. It was about this afternoon that I wanted to say something."

"All right. Here I am!" he said, flinging himself into a low chair by her side. But there was something ungracious in the movement, and his face darkened. He thought she intended to reproach him. Claudia spoke again, still slowly, for her voice was not altogether under control, and she dreaded above all things a breakdown.

"I am just sending a telegram to Elmslie —to my cousins—to ask them to expect me to-day."

"Oh!" said Fenwick, sitting up. "And

may I ask what has brought about this sudden change?"

His dry angry voice acted upon Claudia as a spur. Her eyes brightened as she faced him.

"Need you ask?" Then her voice softened again. "Arthur," she said, "many words are not necessary, are they? It has all been hasty, mistaken, foolish, but it has not lasted very long. Now let us both—forget."

"Do you mean," he asked sharply, "that you wish to break off our engagement?"

"Yes," she answered, groping for words so carefully that she hesitated—"yes, that is what I mean. I did foolishly to agree to it, and that will always be the first thing I shall remember. Why you wished it I don't know"—she drew a long breath—"happily it is not yet too late, and it has just got to be as though it had never been."

"I should still like to know what is my offence. That I left you to go back alone yesterday? I should have supposed that would have pleased you."

"I think you are ungenerous," said the girl, with a flash. "Do you take me for a stone? I am not reproaching you. Oh,"

she broke out more wildly, "can't you let it be over and done with without words?"

"No," said Fenwick savagely. "I suppose this is all woman's confounded jealousy."

He was really angry, and conflicting with a sense of relief came indignation that she could let him go.

"Have it as you like," Claudia answered proudly; "I have said enough. It has been a mistake, a mistake made by us both; but fortunately there is still time to draw back. Some day perhaps you will see that I could not have acted otherwise." She flung out her hands. "There! It is over. Will you ring the bell that I may send this?"

Her manner still stung him, and he was not generous enough to own to himself how entirely he had forced it upon her.

"You have taken the law into your own hands with a vengeance," he said bitterly, as he crossed the room. "Apparently I am expected to accept sentence without so much as being told the manner of my offending. Gloriously feminine, upon my word! Warren, take this to the telegraph office." He held it another moment in his hand and turned to her. "You wish it to go?"

She bent her head, finding words impossible; and when the man had left the room, Fenwick flung back and stood staring at her.

"Well," he said imperiously, "I am waiting for an explanation."

She shook her head.

"Don't expect me to be satisfied with signs. I must have chapter and verse."

It was Claudia's turn to be impatient. She sprang to her feet, her eyes passionately reproachful, her voice firm—

"But I will not say more! Words—words are absolutely vain, and yet you want them; you want my thoughts and feelings put into shape for you to handle them. Don't you see, can't you see, that your very lack of power to do this for yourself shows what a gulf has opened between us? If you loved me"—her voice faltered and recovered itself—"if you loved me, you would understand without words——" She was going to call to witness her own power of entering into his feelings, but checked herself in time, for no tenderness in his manner had gained the right to wring admissions from her which she instinctively knew would be but food for

his vanity. That night, tossing sleepless, she had sworn that she would not let him learn how she had suffered, and to make sure of this kept her face turned from him, fancying that he might read it there. But she raised her hand as she spoke, and when she broke off it dropped heavily by her side.

"No, I don't pretend to be clever enough to understand you," he said sharply. "You judge me harshly, you draw unwarrantable deductions, and refuse either to hear me speak or to speak yourself. How are we ever to hope to set matters right?" He stopped. The mere unexpected discovery that she could give him up, immeasurably raised her value, and yet at the same moment the thought of Helen Arbuthnot rushed into his brain. "I suppose," he went on more quietly, "you are vexed with something I have done or left undone?"

"Is that it?" she asked faintly, with the same consciousness of tension in her speech —a tension which was growing well-nigh intolerable. "Perhaps—I don't know—no, I think it is something much deeper. Whatever it is, I cannot change, but there need be no unkindness between us."

"Oh," he said scornfully, "you have the stock phrases at your fingers' ends!" And then his better angel moved him to compunction. "Claudia, forgive me!"

It was the old intonation, the old tender tone which could yet shake her like a leaf.

"Don't say that," she stammered hastily; "if—if it will make you happier, be sure I shall not ever think hardly of you. It has been what I said—a mistake—that is all. And there is one thing more," she went on in a stronger voice. "In these matters, I don't know, but I suppose the world always thinks that some one is to blame. I am that one, remember. It is I who have done it. Only, would you mind saying this to your sister yourself, and telling her that I must—I must go away to-day?"

He had turned from her, and was leaning against the mantelpiece, his head buried in his arms. Claudia stood and looked at him for one yearning moment, her face troubled, her eyes full of tears.

Before he had time to answer she was gone.

Fenwick neither spoke nor stirred. For a moment he was shaken by a strange rush

of feeling, pricked by an involuntary shame, conscious of something higher and better than himself. But the moment did not last. Other thoughts crowded thickly, and leapt into prominence. The habit of constantly appealing to his own personality, and measuring all things by their relation to it, the invariable dwarfing question which strangled nobler impulses, and could only ask, "How will this affect me?" rose up strong and strangling as ever. They made him hesitate, when generosity would have rushed the words, lest in their utterance he might say more than he would—later—find convenient. Self had through these instruments dominated his nature, checked his expansion, left him cold and self-conscious, made the nobler side of him hate himself. While Claudia spoke, something within him urged quick response, words which should at least answer more adequately to the sweetness of her farewell, more bravely own his fault. But he had crushed the whisper, from a base dread of saying too much, and with the opportunity gone, the poorer part of him began to dominate again. She had voluntarily given him up, and an irritable

vanity, fastening upon this offence, swelled and fumed around it until all other issues were blotted from view. More than once in these latter days, he had been conscious of a wish that he could live over again those days at Huntingdon, but this was an altogether different matter from supposing that Claudia might also desire to reconsider them. He left his position, and, crossing to the window, stood staring blackly out of it, foreseeing many awkwardnesses, but without a thought for poor Claudia, who had flung herself face downwards upon her bed upstairs, and was sobbing passionately. Whatever pressure was put upon the wind-bag of his vanity only forced it out on another side. He was standing, immovable, in the same place when his sister came in.

"Oh, Arthur!" she exclaimed, stopping in the doorway.

He did not look round.

"Well, why 'Oh, Arthur!'?"

"Something has happened. I was certain something was going to happen. I wish I had not gone out. You and Claudia have quarrelled."

"Certainly not." He laughed shortly.

"If you like, we have agreed to differ." He broke off, and added with the same abruptness, "You've got to know, and you may as well know at once that it's all over—amicably, and probably for the best. Claudia goes back to Elmslie to-day, and the only thing for you and Lawrence to do is to hold your tongues."

"That's very easy for you to say, but you must be aware that I shall have to give some sort of explanation," said Mrs. Leslie, with a sense of affront underlying her real dismay.

"No, I am not aware. To whom?" said Fenwick, facing round fiercely. "If the fools want to talk, let them!"

"Of course they will talk."

"As I say—let them!"

Mrs. Leslie drew herself up.

"You might be more civil, Arthur, considering you have brought it on yourself. Pray do you suppose the situation will be agreeable for us?"

"Hang it all!" he burst out. "Say what you like, then! The plain truth is, as any one might see, that we're unsuited, and it's come home to her at last. There it lies in

a nutshell, and you may make what you can of it."

"I saw it long ago."

"I'll wager you did!"

"And," went on his sister coldly, "I can't wonder at the poor child discovering it too. You forced it upon her pretty clearly, you and Helen Arbuthnot."

Fenwick, not displeased at this conjunction of names, moderated his tone.

"There was nothing for her to fuss about, only a woman's jealousy warps her common sense. You'll see that some one goes with her?"

But this provision for her comfort Claudia resolutely declined. It had been only to please her lover that she had consented to be guarded by an escort on her journey to Aldershot, and now that she had no lover to please she would certainly go back in the manner she preferred; she was not in the mood to forego one of her privileges, and Mrs. Leslie argued with her in vain. Free from personal vanity, she had much of the egotism of youth. She belonged to an age which was to reanimate the world, and to a cluster of girls who felt themselves

instinct with corporate force, and whose ignorance had this in it that was noble, that it at least stretched out eager helping hands, with passionate impulses for good. This strong hopeful faith, this assurance that they had to show the world how different a thing a woman's life might become from what it had been in the ages past when shrinking dependence was her distinguishing characteristic, had been cruelly wounded in Claudia as much by her own acts as by the verdict of others. If she had not suffered from obloquy, she had been dangerously near to being laughed out of court, and she had yielded ignominiously to almost the first touch of so-called love. Sore and shamed, she doubted ever getting back to her starting-point. Her career had been cruelly shorn of its dignity, and she felt, not only miserable, but commonplace.

At any rate she could—she would take care of herself in the train.

Once there, she could think more consecutively, if more sadly. In the forlornness and humiliation of her experience, as unlike what she had pictured for herself as it was possible for experience to be, her remembrances

turned gratefully to Elmslie; nay, even lingered with a certain tenderness round the Thornbury home. From there, at any rate, no wounding had come, although it seemed to her, looking back, that she had been singularly aggressive and unaccommodating. Mrs. Hilton's amazement had been modulated by her fine instincts of courtesy, and Harry—Harry, if he had been foolish, at least believed in her.

CHAPTER XIX.

ANNE was in the drawing-room when Claudia reached Elmslie, Anne unquestioning and kindly. Claudia felt herself made welcome, and was conscious of a quiet atmosphere, grateful after the jar and turmoil of the past days. She was glad to rest in an easy-chair, to drink tea from the little old silver teapot which was the pride of Anne's heart, and to hear that Philippa and Emily had gone off to a garden-party.

"Harry Hilton has been here," said Anne, occupying herself with cutting cake, "but he has gone."

Claudia breathed relief. She had dreaded to find Harry established. The telegram announcing her unexpected return must have given an inkling of what had happened, and she could not have endured the sight of his face, with possibly a reawakened hope

beaming in it. Now she could more freely tell her story.

"Anne," she said, in a voice not quite steady, "I want to explain why I have come back."

"If you like," Anne replied gently. "But you know this is to be home, without any need for explanations."

"I know. And I don't think explain was quite the word to use, for I can't explain yet, even to myself. Only it is all over between Captain Fenwick and me." As Anne did not speak, she went on hurriedly, "You don't mind my not saying more, do you?"

"No, I don't mind," said Anne, with that warm inflexion of the voice which is like a caress. "I am only wondering whether it is quite right to leave you to fight your own battles single-handed. Can nothing be done?"

Claudia sprang up and went to the window.

"Please," she said, with her back to her cousin, "I don't want sympathy."

"Or help?"

"Or help."

"Then you shall go your own way in peace," Anne said, smiling.

"And one thing more." Claudia came back to the table. "Whatever it is, you must understand that it is my own, absolutely my own doing."

"I understand. For," said Anne afterwards to Philippa, "when people are miserable, the best one can do for them is to let them be miserable in their own fashion."

"Is she miserable, or only sore?"

"Only sore!" repeated Anne. "As if to be sore and shamed were not misery enough for a nature like Claudia's! But I believe she really loved the man, and has been hard hit, poor child!"

"Well, it will do her no harm," Philippa announced. "What a pity it is that nothing of the sort ever happened to Emily!"

"Philippa!"

"To be sure Emily has never taken her independence fiercely, has never, indeed, taken it at all, but she has always sighed for it. If once the thing had advanced towards her, Emily would have screamed and run away, while Claudia has been so entranced with its charms that she has been ready to take shadow for substance. Harry, now, Harry's good stout sense would have allowed

her a long tether, but no doubt Captain Fenwick jerked the rope too sharply."

Claudia's departure made no stir at Aldershot, because it was supposed that her visit had come naturally to an end; and if there were any who had gleams of suspicion as to the real cause, Fenwick was not a man to offer himself readily for questioning, and Mrs. Leslie took the opportunity of going away for a week or two.

"Of course he and Helen Arbuthnot will make it up again, and then there will be a pretty talk!" she said irritably to her husband. "Well, I am sick of Arthur's love affairs. I wash my hands of them for the future."

"Helen Arbuthnot? But isn't she engaged to young Pelham?"

"Oh, what of that!" cried Mrs. Leslie, with a fine scorn.

Two or three days passed, however, and nothing had occurred to justify her words. On the fourth, Fenwick and Miss Arbuthnot met at a dinner given at a commanding officer's quarters. They did not exchange a word until the end of the evening, when the guests strolled out into the garden. Pelham was not there, and if Fenwick had

watched for an opportunity, he took it, as usual, boldly. He walked straight to Miss Arbuthnot.

"I must speak to you," he said. "Alone."

She shrugged her shoulders, but made no objection. The night was hot, she wore a white dress, and round her throat had wrapped a scarf of a soft gauze, with silver threads running through it. In the moonlight these shimmered and flashed, and set off the rich brown of her hair. The regimental band was playing, otherwise it was strangely quiet for the neighbourhood of a camp. Presently they reached the limit of the turf, and Helen stopped.

"Well," she asked abruptly, "what have you to say?"

"How can I say anything when you speak in such a tone?" he demanded. "There is a seat under that tree beyond."

She walked on.

"Are you aware that we are affording much food for remarks?" she said presently.

He took no notice of her question.

"I had to speak to you," he began; "I want to be the first to tell you what has happened."

"It was scarcely necessary," she returned coldly. "After hearing that Miss Hamilton had departed, I could draw in the details myself. For that matter, I could have drawn them beforehand."

"No doubt you could, considering how much you had to do with them," he said, with a laugh so self-assured that Miss Arbuthnot bit her lip.

"I?"

"Yes. She was jealous of you, and I can hardly blame her."

"Oh, I don't blame her at all."

"Blame? No. Why, I bless her. She opened my eyes. A little longer, and it might have been too late."

"Oh no. That misfortune," said Miss Arbuthnot scornfully, "could never happen to you. A means of deliverance always offers itself in good time. And did she—Claudia, I mean—enjoy her mission?"

She had stung him at last, for he moved fretfully.

"You might understand that—that it was all painful, and I don't want to talk about it. The point is"—he used Claudia's words—"that it is over and done with."

"Well, go on," she said, opening and shutting her fan. "I understand that I am to keep my intelligence fixed on the fact that it is over and done with, and that Claudia's feelings belong to a side issue with which one has nothing to do. Go on."

This time he turned angrily upon her.

"You speak as if I had done the girl an injury. Granted that I was a fool—a double-distilled fool—would it have been for her happiness to have persisted in the folly?"

"No," said Miss Arbuthnot, in a low voice; "it would not."

"Then you own I was right?"

"Oh, don't make me your judge!" she cried impatiently. "Right? I see no right from beginning to end. But what of that? What have I to do with it?"

He answered coolly, "Everything."

She hesitated for a moment. Perhaps she was calling back her self-possession, which had been startled. At any rate, when she spoke again, it was more quietly.

"This is interesting. May I hear more?"

"I mean you to. I said that Claudia was jealous of you. That was because she discovered my secret. Helen, it has been

madness, from beginning to end—our break-off, our fancying we had ceased to care, our taking up with others. Don't let us play any longer. My step is taken, take yours, and let us be married next month."

"You mean," she said slowly, "I am to throw over——"

"Oh, that fellow!" he exclaimed. "You're not engaged to him, you know very well, not seriously, and if you were, you care for me fifty times as well. Deny it if you can!"

"Oh!" she said, with a gasp, "you think so?"

"Think? I'm as certain as that I'm here."

His sense of mastery made him almost indifferent to pleading. Each sentence breathed triumph. Miss Arbuthnot caught her breath, and turned her face towards him. He went on—

"People may—will—talk. Let them. Their hateful chatter will not affect us. Helen—dearest—"

She broke in, and put up her hand.

"No, no, stop, please! We have not got so far as 'dearest.' Suppose we see where we are. Up to this point you have only

assured me of my own feelings. What of your own?"

"You know them, you must know them."

"Excuse me, no. When last we discussed them I gathered that they were somewhat topsy-turvy, and you agreed with me that there had been a mistake. Now it seems there has been another, and you must own that it becomes perplexing."

He made an impatient gesture.

"Don't play with me, Helen, for I can't bear it. You're the only woman I ever cared for. There! Isn't that enough?"

With a movement so sudden as to startle him, she sprang to her feet, standing with her head thrown back, and the moonlight whitening her face.

"No," she exclaimed passionately, "it is not! Do you know that all your life, and all your love—such as it is!—has hinged only upon what *you* feel, what *you* want? You have measured everything, balanced everything, chosen everything by that and that alone. But what of us? I sometimes wonder whether you ever cast one thought at the poor puppets you set up, and whose hearts you demand. You want the flattery

of their love; you have it and tire of it. Enough! Toss it on one side, it is over and done with——"

He interrupted her with real amazement.

"You can say this—Helen, you? Over! Why am I here to-night?"

"Oh," she said with scorn, "because I have slipped out of your hold, and have suddenly become valuable. While you believed you had only to raise your finger to bring me back—at Thornbury, for instance—I was nothing, nothing! But now, now that unexpectedly the power seemed slipping from you, you could not endure the loss. It was the same with that girl. Your vanity, your worst self, was piqued by her indifference, her reluctance; you set yourself to win her, and when you had succeeded, she began to weary you. That was why I warned her. You believe, and she believes, that it was jealousy, but you are wrong—both of you. It was pity, profoundest pity, and a wish to spare her something of—what I had felt myself."

Against her will her voice trembled over these last words, and Fenwick caught the change.

"Say what hard things you like," he cried triumphantly, "you love me still!"

Her voice, still not quite under control, sounded curiously dull.

"No," she said. "You are mistaken. I do not."

"Deny it," he broke in, with a short laugh, "deny it as you please, it is true. Come, Helen, you have had your say; I don't know why you have turned yourself into her advocate, but I'm ready to admit I haven't treated Claudia well. In spite of your hard hitting, can't you see that it was you who drove me to distraction? Suppose it had been too late."

"It is," she said quietly.

"You're not engaged!"

"I have been engaged a week."

"To that man?"

"To Mr. Pelham."

He was silent, and she heard his hard breathing. When he spoke his voice was hoarse.

"Well, you can't marry him."

"Why not?"

"Why?" He laughed gratingly. "Women are inexplicable, but isn't there still some

sort of necessity to pretend that a little more than money is wanted for a husband?"

"You are right," said Miss Arbuthnot slowly. "Fortunately for me I need not pretend. I am going to marry Mr. Pelham because—I love him."

There was a silence which lasted for what seemed to her an interminable time. Fenwick broke it with an effort.

"We had better go back," he said. They walked across the moonlit grass, white flowers stood out starlike in the beds, and the band was playing very softly an air out of *Hansel und Grethel.* Suddenly he exclaimed, "You might have spared me this!"

"How?"

"You might have let me know I had no chance."

"Why did you take it for granted that you had?" Miss Arbuthnot retorted coldly.

"Oh, why?" He flung the question back at her, and strode moodily on. But at the door he turned once more. "Do you really intend to marry him?"

"The wedding-day is fixed."

"Absurd!" he cried roughly.

CHAPTER XX.

AS age creeps on, there are other deaths than those we mourn openly. Sometimes hope dies, or faith, or love—and from the infinite blackness of such loss, may God in His mercy keep us!—sometimes it is ambition, or friendship, which is worse. But all death is sad, except, as perhaps we shall find, our own, for that should mean recovering again some good things which we have lost.

Claudia went through several phases at this time. It was not extraordinary; most men and women do after a crisis, particularly a crisis which has in it anything humiliating. She fancied that her old occupation would give her interest, and forced herself into working furiously at certain plans. When they failed, or seemed to fail, she lost heart, and believed herself incapable. By way of expiation,

she sat humbly at Emily's feet, printing hundreds of leaflets in the palest and most uninviting inks, and dutifully attended Anne when she paid visits in the Close, and, far from flaunting nineteenth-century aims in the eyes of her listeners, tried to fling herself into the pettiest of local interests.

"If she goes on like this, by-and-by she will elope with the Dean, or do something equally sinful," announced Philippa one day as she snipped withered flowers in the garden.

"I know," said Anne uneasily. "But I don't know what to suggest. And I fancied she would be better for finding out for herself."

"Get her to go bicycling again."

"I suppose," Anne hesitated and sighed—"I suppose it would not do to have Harry? He is dying to come."

"No, indeed. You prudent people are always the most reckless. We are all boring her to death just now, and Harry would be only another element of boredom. No; the bicycle."

It was not easy, because the bicycle had unavoidable associations, and also made part of a certain untold scheme of renunciation.

But restlessness, together with an inevitable reaction from the life into which she was squeezing herself, came to Anne's help. The burdens we choose for ourselves often gall and fret, while those which God lays on us are moulded to our use by the great Master's hand. The girl was growing sore and impatient over her self-imposed tasks, and Philippa was right. For now she went off by herself, and fought hard battles under fresh windy skies, often through rain and storm, and came back with wet cheeks and uncurled hair, but with the old glow and brightness awakening in her eyes.

"I told you so!" cried Philippa, not in the least above that feminine weakness. "And I have another idea. She wants a playfellow, and Harry shall send her a dog."

"A dog!" exclaimed Emily in dismay. "But you would never have one here on account of Belisarius." Belisarius was the cat, and he ruled Philippa with a rod of iron.

"I think I could persuade Belisarius," she said, with a sigh. "He puts up with Vic, and I could make him understand that the dog was not ours."

Claudia, sounded, expressed pleasure.

Nothing was said as to Harry's part in the affair until a very perfectly bred fox-terrier arrived one day from Thornbury, and then she admired him too much to have qualms as to his acceptance. It is true that she said hastily to Anne, "My taking this doesn't mean anything?" And Anne could truthfully assure her that she was not the first person to receive a dog from Thornbury; but without this assurance, she did justice to a certain generosity in Harry Hilton's character, which would prevent his trying to place her under an obligation.

The dog was a greater success than the bicycle, partly from his merits, partly from an aptitude for getting into trouble; not from disagreeableness—for he had a delightful temper, but from a cheerful joy in fighting for fighting's sake, which kept Claudia constantly on the alert. There was an awful battle on the first day between him and Belisarius, which laid a foundation of mutual respect, though it nearly killed Philippa; and a sponge and hot water were invariably ready for Claudia, when she returned from a long bicycle ride. One day she surprised Anne by saying—

"I think I will go to Thornbury to-morrow, before the days get too short."

"Do," said Anne. "You won't find Harry there."

"No. I heard you telling Emily that he was away. I should like to see Mrs. Hilton and the trees."

She carried out her intention, which was perhaps meant as much to give Fox pleasure as for any other reason. The morning was fresh, the sky whitening for rain. When she reached Thornbury, Mrs. Hilton's delight and distress expressed themselves with many a "so."

"My dear, it is so good of you to come! And all that way! Why, you must be tired to death, poor thing! And it is so annoying that Harry should be away! His father was a little better, and he had been waiting for an opportunity to run up to London, so he went, and will not be back till to-morrow. I am so sorry!"

"I knew that he was away. I came to see you, and I thought you would give me some luncheon."

"Indeed I will. So good of you to think of such a thing, and on your bicycle,

too! I have just had a letter from Helen Arbuthnot; you remember her, don't you?"

Claudia's face was turned in another direction. "Yes," she answered.

"Well, she has quite taken my breath away, telling me she is going to be married, poor thing! and I hadn't the least idea of it. People are so sudden in these days, in and out of an engagement before one has time to look round"—and then Mrs. Hilton began to flounder—"my dear—you must forgive me—I never meant—oh dear! I wonder whether Mr. Hilton has had his paper?"

The moment had come, and Claudia, although she had paled, was scarcely conscious of her companion's distress. She was nerving herself for the expected tidings.

"Who does she say she is going to marry?" she asked, in a voice which to her own ears sounded strange and unreal.

Mrs. Hilton joyfully ran to this outlet.

"I think it was a Mr. Pelham—somebody, I know, that I had never heard of—but it is in the Morning Post, so we can easily see. Huish"—to the butler—"we want yesterday's paper."

The news sent Claudia's blood coursing.

She found herself constantly wondering how it had come to pass, and what—for something there surely must have been—had passed between Fenwick and Helen. It almost amazed her that it did not work a revulsion in her own feelings, as it seemed to show that, at least as to one point, she had jumped to a wrong conclusion. But she tried to keep before her eyes that on the principal point there could be no such mistake—he did not love her, he did not love her; in their last interview he had not even pretended love. And though a passionate heart cried out that it might reawaken, pitiless sense told her that the dead do not come to life again—here.

Such thoughts touched her, passed, returned, like a broken reflection on the water, while Mrs. Hilton's kindly talk gurgled on, exacting little attention. If Claudia failed in an answer, she set it down to the physical weariness of her ride, and yet, as she said afterwards, she had never liked her so much, or found her so gentle.

"You know, my dear, she rather kept me on tenter-hooks when she was here before, for, to my old-fashioned notions, she was just

a little surprising, and I never quite knew what she was going to do next; but yesterday she was as nice as possible, and seemed so glad to be here again, poor thing! And she remembered all about Huish's rheumatism, which I thought wonderful in such a young girl. We walked all over the place, and she did not say a word about cutting down more trees, so I hope she has got over that funny little craze. I asked her when she would come and stay here again, and she thanked me so nicely! She said she would like it some day, but not just yet, and of course, poor thing! it is very natural she should want a little quiet time after that sad business. I really could not have believed it of that pleasant Captain Fenwick!"

All this was spoken to Harry, who had but just returned from London, and who sat listening, his face in shade, and his arms on his knees. He was, as usual in cricket time, furiously burnt, and his laugh rang as cheerily as ever, though, his mother sometimes fancied, not so often. Now he neither laughed nor answered her, and she grew uncomfortable.

"Perhaps I shouldn't have said that?

Perhaps you would rather not have any one asked here just now? My dear boy, it is easy enough to put it off a little. On no account would I do anything you disliked."

He laughed now. An odd little laugh.

"*I* shouldn't dislike it." After a momentary hesitation, he said, "I think you ought to know that nothing on earth would make me so happy as her coming of her own free will to stay. But she won't."

To say that Mrs. Hilton was astonished is to use an inadequate word. It is no less certain that she was dismayed, for no woman on earth appeared to her worthy to be her son's wife, and her "Oh, Harry!" carried in it unusual protest. He went on quickly—

"When she was here before I asked her to marry me, and she refused——"

"Refused!"

"—I don't know whether I shall ask her again. That depends. If I don't, one thing I know, I shall never marry another woman."

"Refused you! What could she be thinking of!"

His mother's indignation brought his old

laugh. He got up, and straightened himself.

"Well, I'm afraid it was that she didn't care for your son. Perhaps she never will. But she came over here to-day, and I don't mean to give up while there's the ghost of a chance."

"A chance! My dear Harry, ridiculous!" cried his mother, impatiently. "But you take away my breath! I never thought of such a thing. I am not sure she's good enough, I am not, indeed! She is a pretty creature, of course, and one knows all about her, which is always a comfort, but she has such very peculiar notions. This going about on bicycles cutting trees. My dear, I couldn't bear that for your wife."

"She will never do anything of which you and my father need be ashamed," he said shortly.

"But her ideas——"

"As for her ideas, time enough to talk about them if ever she consents to be my wife. I should not interfere with them."

Mrs. Hilton stood up, let all her knitting fall in a tangle on the floor, and laid a trembling hand on her son's arm.

"Harry!"

"Yes, mother."

"You mustn't be angry. You know that your happiness is our first, our very first thought."

"I know," he said briefly. But he put his hand on hers.

"You have been such a son to us—my dear"—she broke down a little—"may God bless you, and give you a good wife!"

Is not any man the better for such a benediction? Whether the desire of his heart be granted or not, I think the strength of a mother's unselfish love carries it straight to the throne of God, and brings back a blessing, rich and plentiful.

Harry had learnt wisdom, and did not rush off impetuously to Elmslie, as he felt inclined. He stayed away, indeed, so long that Philippa began to grumble, and Claudia to feel guiltily that she was depriving her cousins of their favourite visitor. She had made an unsuccessful effort to get work through the principal of the college, but either her late experiences had shaken their faith in her; or the authorities preferred giving orders to those who needed them

more; or Claudia's first brilliant successes had been due to circumstances not so absolutely dependent upon her merits as she flattered herself. At any rate no orders came, and with winter at hand it did not seem likely that they would arrive. It was annoying, but one thing was evident to them all—Claudia's heart was not broken. The want of interest, the evident strain of her first return, were, little by little but no less surely, wearing off. It could hardly have been otherwise, since, after all, she had been more dominated than attracted by Fenwick's strong personality, and once having snapped its bonds, her own character reasserted itself. There was, it is true, a danger lest the reaction of this self-assertion should be too complete, and leave her hardened. Perhaps it was the nature of her surroundings which saved her from the peril. For there was a fresh and wholesome vigour about Philippa Cartwright, an honest dutifulness in Emily, a true and delicate sympathy in Anne, which she could not but recognize, now that her eyes had opened to a broader view, and she was brave enough to own to her mistakes. The

result was that her heart began to cling to Elmslie, while she was still occupied with plans for the future. At last—

"I think I will go abroad for three or four months," she announced to Anne one wet autumn day, as they trudged back from the town. "It would do me a lot of good to study some of the old Italian gardens. There's one in particular near Viterbo, laid out by Vignola. Will you come?"

"Ah, I can't," Anne returned, shaking her head and smiling. "I have reached the point in life in which I know the world would collapse if I left Elmslie for more than a week. Ask Philippa. She's the adventurous one."

"Well. Fox wouldn't like it, though."

"We'll send him back to Thornbury."

"And you could have Harry Hilton," mused Claudia. She gave an impatient shake. "How silly it all has been, and how many lives have been made uncomfortable! I suppose if I went away he would be here as much as he used to be?"

"Perhaps he will come by-and-by even if you stayed."

"No; and if he did, he would be looking

or saying something which I should hate. Unless you can make him understand that I shall never marry."

Anne was silent, and employed herself in closing her umbrella. The rain had ceased, but there was a wintry wind, and yellow leaves lay rotting in the road. As they came towards the gate, they saw a man's figure emerging, and Fox was off like a shot.

"Harry!" cried Anne, and with such delight that Claudia stifled her own displeasure. She was displeased, because she expected a renewal of all that she disliked, but as the days went on, she was obliged to admit that Harry behaved admirably. That she was first with him—always—she could not fail to see, but neither word nor look forced the knowledge to her embarrassment. By degrees she unstiffened, and fell back on their old friendliness. Nor did he stay long. Perhaps to have done so and yet have made no sign, might have been beyond his powers, but, be that as it may, Claudia accepted his unexpected silence as proof of a stronger character than she had credited him with. Nor, now that she did

not obstinately close her eyes, could she fail to see how in trouble or difficulty of whatever kind, it was to Harry that the trouble was taken with absolute confidence in his helpfulness. On the whole, Anne hoped he had rather made ground than lost it.

Philippa and Claudia went abroad that winter, travelling in sun-baked out-of-the-way places in Italy, perhaps even more to Philippa's delight than Claudia's. Philippa wrote to her sister that the girl showed no sign of wishing to shock people, "but she seems resolved to pick up her work again when she returns to England, and is studying eagerly. The note-book, however, seldom steps into prominence, and I have never heard the word 'career.' I remark that she is careful to check all interests that show signs of undue development."

In the course of the early spring, news of Mr. Hilton's death came to the travellers, and then Philippa, who had hitherto avoided talk of Harry, allowed herself to launch forth into an account of what he had given up for his father's sake.

"And the poor man so irritable! I dare

say it was caused by illness, but really he made every one's life a burden. Harry's patience was not to be told."

Claudia expressed no opinion, but she listened. Further, she sent a message to Mrs. Hilton and her son, and, that being over, appeared to forget them. She and Philippa left Rome in April, and travelled so as to reach London by the middle of May, going for two or three days to a hotel in South Kensington. There, on the morning after their return, Harry Hilton walked in.

This time the girl showed no displeasure; it seemed to Philippa that she looked at him with an air of reflection. Philippa herself hailed him with delight.

"I am so tired of taking care of myself!" she announced one morning, "and as Claudia allows me no conveyance more luxurious than a 'bus—in which she flatters herself she is paying homage to Socialism—I am thankful to have a man to find the right one."

Claudia laughed gaily.

"There's a mission for you!"

He did not seem to object. He went

everywhere with them, and Philippa, reading in his face that he meant again to put his fate to the touch before long, grew nervous herself, uncertain whether to utter a warning or not. She dropped the idea, but it touched her to the quick when she pictured a second rebuff.

Their last morning they spent in the Park, where the rhododendrons were breaking into flower. Philippa met with an old friend, and Harry suggested to Claudia that they should stroll on and look at the Serpentine. She assented without hesitation, yet, as they silently walked, side by side, something in the silence set her heart fluttering, and, to her amazement, she became conscious of a painful want of breath. She would have given a good deal to have spoken, to have gone back, but she dared not trust herself, for the strange excitement, for which she could not account, was depriving her of her self-possession. Just before, she had been calm, talking to Harry with the ease of an old friend, and now something—she knew not what—had raised an unexpected tumult, and swept the rudder out of her hand. There was a din in her ears, and

suddenly she heard his voice, hoarse and changed—

"Only give me one crumb of hope to live upon. Claudia, can't you love me?"

Could this be love? "Oh, impossible!" she cried, almost angrily.

"Why impossible?" he asked, persistently fighting for an answer.

"I told you at Thornbury——"

"But now—now——" He pressed her impetuously.

"I can't! You mustn't ask me."

"I must, I must!" Something was creeping into his voice which she had never heard there before, something at which her heart fluttered, her voice failed.

"You forget what has passed."

"Passed! What is that to me? Claudia!"

"I must live my own life—I should shock your mother—your belongings."

He caught her hands in his, and his honest eyes looked into hers, heedless of passers-by.

"Mine!" he cried joyfully. "Mine at last!"

So—while there is no resurrection for a

dead love—love, fresh and living, often steals into our hearts from unexpected hiding-places, and makes them his own. And, so long as this can be, our old world, weary and suffering, blossoms again into rosy youth, and tastes the joy which is eternal.

THE END.

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